

## Monstrous Alterities: Deformity as Otherness in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*

R. Vijay Karthic\*  

### Abstract

*This paper explores the theme of otherness through deformity in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy, analyzing how physical abnormalities serve as markers of societal marginalization, prejudice, and moral complexity. In the narrative, characters like the Nagas are labeled as monstrous due to their physical differences, embodying a constructed otherness that reflects the biases of Meluhan society. Through Shiva's evolving perception of the Nagas and his relationships with deformed characters such as Kali and Ganesh, the trilogy dismantles the simplistic link between appearance and morality. The deformities of the Nagas, initially seen as grotesque, are later revealed to be consequences of the Meluhans' own unethical practices involving the Somras, an elixir responsible for both their prosperity and the deformities in marginalized communities. By portraying deformity as a complex and relational identity rather than a symbol of inherent evil, Tripathi critiques societal tendencies to fear and ostracize physical differences, emphasizing empathy, self-acceptance, and inclusion as essential for social unity. Shiva's journey from prejudice to acceptance underscores the moral imperative to transcend superficial judgments, urging a redefinition of heroism based on character and compassion rather than physical conformity. This analysis sheds light on Tripathi's use of monstrous alterities to question cultural perceptions of beauty, morality, and justice, positioning The Shiva Trilogy as a socially reflective modern epic.*

**Keywords:** Shiva Trilogy, Otherness, Deformity, Empathy, Societal Prejudice, Naga Identity

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\*R. Vijay Karthic, Ph.D Scholar (Reg. No: 21211274011014), PG and Research Department of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Palayamkottai - 627002, Tamil Nadu, India.

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In literature, physical deformity often serves as a powerful symbol for societal alienation, moral ambiguity, and the complexities of human identity. Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*, comprising *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, utilizes deformity and monstrosity not merely as superficial markers of character but as vehicles for a profound critique of societal prejudice, fear, and moral relativism. Rooted in the reimagined story of Lord Shiva, the trilogy follows Shiva's journey from an unassuming tribal leader to the revered Neelkanth, the savior of Meluha. Along this path, Shiva encounters the Nagas, a race stigmatized and ostracized due to their physical deformities—who are initially perceived as monstrous threats to Meluhan society. This perception is heavily shaped by cultural biases that equate physical abnormalities with malevolence, invoking notions of the grotesque to mark the Nagas as the other. This paper examines how Tripathi constructs the Nagas as embodiments of otherness, with their deformities symbolizing the broader social and moral alterities that challenge Meluhan ideals. By analyzing Shiva's evolving relationship with deformed characters such as Kali and Ganesh, the study interrogates the trilogy's critique of simplistic binaries between beauty and monstrosity, virtue and vice. Deformity in the *Shiva Trilogy* transcends the physical, reflecting the moral deformities within Meluhan society itself, which cherishes the life-giving Somras even as it breeds suffering for others. Tripathi's narrative thus calls into question the ethical underpinnings of cultural prejudice, as Shiva's journey illustrates the transformative power of empathy in dismantling superficial judgments. For instance, from the novel, as Kali states:

Nagas is born with small outgrowths, which don't seem like, much initially, but are actually harbingers of years of torture, continued Kali. It almost feels like a demon has taken over your body. And he's bursting out from within, slowly, over many years, causing soul-crushing pain that becomes your constant companion. 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 the Somras. (*The Oath of the Vayuputras*, 16)

In challenging the reader to look beyond physical appearance, Tripathi redefines heroism as an inclusive and compassionate moral stance rather than a marker of physical conformity or purity. The *Shiva Trilogy* ultimately expands the concept of mythological heroism to include empathy, acceptance, and a recognition of the humanity in those deemed monstrous. Through this lens, the narrative highlights the societal and individual consequences of defining people by their physical or cultural otherness, making a compelling case for the ethical and moral imperative of understanding beyond appearances. This study seeks to explore how Tripathi's treatment of deformity and otherness not only reshapes traditional mythological motifs but also offers a socially resonant reflection on prejudice, identity, and the boundaries of moral perception in modern society.

In Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*, the theme of otherness is powerfully conveyed through physical deformities and perceived monstrosities that characterize various groups and individuals in the narrative, such as the Nagas. By examining deformity as a marker of otherness, Tripathi not only challenges traditional notions of heroism and villainy but also critiques societal attitudes toward physical and social differences. This paper explores how the trilogy uses deformity and difference as tools to signify monstrous alterities or the construction of the other in ways that question cultural biases, redefine monstrosity, and allow for a more nuanced understanding of moral and personal identity. As Michael Kelly puts it:

Although there are divergent interpretations and incarnations of grotesque imagery from one Western period to another, such as from Greco-Roman to medieval, these styles and their cultural context overlap and build on one another. To describe a non-Western image, such as the Indian deity Śiva, as grotesque or monstrous because it has multiple arms imposes a foreign set of presumptions on the image that contradicts its intended meanings. (*Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 338)

Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*, comprising *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, follows the journey of Shiva, a simple tribal warrior from Tibet, who is prophesied to be the savior of Meluha and comes to be revered as the Neelkanth, or the 'destroyer of evil.' Through his journey, Shiva encounters the Nagas, a race marked by physical deformities and viewed as evil outsiders by Meluhan society. The Nagas, whose physical abnormalities distinguish them visually and socially, come to represent the theme of alterity, or otherness, which is often linked to deformity. The Meluhan society's disdain for the Nagas reflects deep-seated prejudices against those who appear different, using physical deformity as a way to dehumanize, demonize, and ultimately marginalize them. However, as Shiva learns more about the Nagas, he comes to understand that physical appearance does not define one's moral character, revealing the trilogy's critique of simplistic binaries between beauty and monstrosity, virtue and vice. As Wolfgang Kayser warrants mention, "From classical times the monstrous is often equated with hybrid forms having grotesque bodies where the realm of the inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals and human beings and where the laws of statics, symmetry and proportion are no longer valid" (21).

The trilogy's portrayal of the Nagas begins with the Meluhans' fear and loathing of them. In *The Immortals of Meluha*, the Nagas are introduced as a shadowy and dangerous force, perceived as grotesque figures due to their physical deformities. Their appearance is distinctly non-human, with features like extra limbs, fangs, and serpentine characteristics that evoke feelings of disgust and fear in the Meluhans. This reaction aligns with the concept of the grotesque in literature, where physical deformities are used to convey an unnatural or threatening presence. As Arthur Clayborough points out in *The Grotesque in English Literature* is synonymous

with the unnatural, ridiculous and bizarre. He demonstrates:

The word grotesque thus comes to be applied in a more general fashion during the Age of Reason and of Neo-Classicism—when the characteristics of the grotesque style of art—extravagance, fantasy, individual taste, and the rejection of the natural conditions of organization are the object of ridicule and disapproval. The most general sense which it has developed by the early eighteenth century is therefore that of ridiculous, distorted, unnatural. (6)

For the Meluhans, the Nagas' deformities serve as a visual cue of evil, making it easier for them to other these people and cast them as a malevolent race. In this way, deformity becomes a narrative device that distances the Nagas from the normal Meluhan populace, emphasizing their status as outsiders. However, the trilogy complicates this initial perception of the Nagas as monstrous. As Tripathi writes:

They are cursed people, my Lord. They are born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous births. Deformities like extra hands or horribly misshapen faces. But they have tremendous strength and skills. The Naga name alone strikes terror in any citizen's heart. They are not even allowed to live in the Sapt Sindhu. (*The Immortals of Meluha* 61)

As Shiva embarks on his journey and encounters Naga characters like Kali and Ganesh, he learns that their deformities are not a reflection of their moral character but are instead the result of genetic abnormalities or birth defects. For instance, Ganesh, who is initially portrayed as a fearsome warrior with a large elephantine nose, turns out to be Shiva's son. Amish Tripathi describes Ganesh's appearance as:

The Naga's forehead was ridiculously broad, his eyes placed on the side, almost facing different directions. His nose was abnormally long, stretching out like the trunk of an elephant. Two back teeth struck out of the mouth, one of them broken. The legacy of an old injury, perhaps. The ears were floppy and large, shaking off their own accord. It almost seemed like the head of an elephant had been placed on the body of this unfortunate soul. (*The Secret of Nagas*, 222)

His deformity, which would traditionally mark him as monstrous or other, does not affect his kindness, loyalty, or bravery. As Ganesh asks Sati, "Ugly, aren't I? ... Is that why you abandoned me? Soft tears were rolling down the Naga's cheeks. 'Because you couldn't even bear to look at me?' (*The Secret of Nagas*, 223). By rehumanizing Ganesh and depicting his struggles with his appearance and the social stigma associated with it, Tripathi encourages readers to look beyond surface-level appearances and challenge their assumptions about beauty and virtue. Kali, Shiva's sister-in-law and the queen of the Nagas, represents another complex portrayal of deformity as alterity. She is born with an extra pair of arms, a physical attribute that sets her apart and reinforces her position as a societal outsider. As Tripathi introduces Kali in the novel:

Standing a little to her left was the Naga Queen. Her entire torso had an exoskeleton covering it, hard as bone. There were small balls of bone which ran from her shoulders down to her stomach, almost like a garland of skulls. On top of her shoulders were two small extra appendages, serving as a third and fourth arm. One was holding a knife, clearly itching to fling it at Sati. But it was the face that disturbed Sati the most. The colour was jet black, but the Naga Queen's face was almost an exact replica of Sati's. (*The Secret of the Nagas*, 223)

Despite her physical differences, Kali is a fierce, intelligent leader who demonstrates great compassion and courage. Her deformities, rather than symbolizing monstrosity, come to symbolize resilience and strength, challenging the Meluhan society's superficial judgments. Through Kali's character, Tripathi subverts traditional representations of deformity by showing how physical differences are merely one aspect of a person's identity, which should not dictate how they are valued or treated. Both Kali and Ganesh epitomize the opportunity for marginalized communities to reclaim their identities and challenge oppressive power dynamics. Through their leadership, the Nagas are empowered to assert their position in the broader political context, prompting the Meluhans to acknowledge their biases and the injustices prevalent in their social structure.

In addition to characterizing individuals with deformities, the trilogy also uses deformity as a broader metaphor for societal corruption and hypocrisy. The Meluhans, who consider themselves the epitome of civilization, are revealed to be deeply flawed, with a rigid caste system and an intolerance for diversity. This hypocrisy is laid bare when Shiva learns of the Somras, the elixir of immortality that sustains Meluhan society but is responsible for the pollution and deformities in surrounding regions, including the lands inhabited by the Nagas. The Somras, which is coveted for its life-giving properties, ironically creates deformities in those exposed to its waste. This revelation serves as a powerful metaphor for the moral deformities within Meluhan society. While the Meluhans outwardly condemn the Nagas for their physical differences, they are indirectly responsible for causing these deformities through their own selfish use of the Somras. Thus, the trilogy critiques the hypocrisy of a society that marginalizes those who bear the consequences of its own corrupt practices. As Marlene Tromp rightly observes:

Freakified bodies are represented as existing in a binary relationship to the norm. The logic upon which this binary is constructed aligns nonstigmatized bodies with the cultural ideal. What this opposition offers to subjects whose bodies are thus defined as normal is the illusion of freedom from the uncertainties, flux, and grotesqueries of bodily existence. This fiction can only be maintained, however, by the continued and systematic devaluation of the freakified body, for it is only by comparison with stigmatized subjects that "normal" ones appear free. (*Victorian Freaks*, 44-45)

Moreover, the trilogy's treatment of deformity and otherness extends to Shiva's own journey of self-discovery. As he grapples with his role as the Neelkanth and the destroyer of evil, Shiva must confront his own prejudices and limitations. His initial reactions to the Nagas mirror the Meluhan society's fear and revulsion, but his understanding evolves as he forms relationships with them. This shift reflects a larger theme in the trilogy: the importance of empathy and open-mindedness in overcoming the fear of the other. Shiva's willingness to challenge his own biases and accept those who are different from him ultimately strengthens his character and solidifies his role as a true leader. In the novel, Brahaspati says: "That doesn't happen in Meluha, Shiva, ... Giving birth to a stillborn child is probably one of the worst ways in which a woman can become a vikarma. Only giving birth to a Naga child would be considered worse. Thank god that didn't happen. Because then she would have been completely ostracised from society" (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 205).

The conflict between the Suryavanshi (Meluhans) and the Nagas also reflects the trilogy's exploration of power dynamics in the construction of otherness. The Meluhans, who occupy a position of privilege and dominance, use their power to label the Nagas as monstrous and dangerous. By portraying the Nagas as misunderstood rather than inherently evil, as Daksha alleges that:

The Chandravanshis are corrupt and disgusting people. No morals. No ethics. They are the source of all our problems. Some of us believe that Lord Ram was too kind. He should have completely destroyed them. But he forgave them and let them live. In fact, we have to face the mortification of seeing the Chandravanshis rule over Lord Ram's birthplace - Ayodhya! (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 102)

This construction of the Nagas as the other serves to justify the Meluhans' actions against them, as they believe they are defending their society from a perceived threat. However, as Shiva learns, the Nagas are not inherently evil; they have been cast into this role by the Meluhans' refusal to understand or accept their differences. By highlighting how otherness is constructed and maintained by those in power, Tripathi critiques the societal tendency to fear and ostracize those who deviate from the norm.

Tripathi also uses the theme of deformity and otherness to explore issues of identity and self-acceptance. Characters like Ganesh and Kali, who are forced to grapple with their physical differences, must find ways to reconcile their identities with a society that views them as abnormal. Their journeys highlight the importance of self-acceptance and resilience in the face of societal rejection. Ganesh, for instance, embraces his identity despite the stigma attached to his appearance, ultimately becoming a respected warrior and leader. Kali, similarly, finds strength in her differences, leading the Nagas with dignity and determination. Sati, Kali's sister, had previously upheld the societal view that deformity equalled impurity. "How polite and scientific," said Kali. "But one cannot even begin to imagine the physical

pain and torture that we undergo as children when these ‘outgrowths’ occur. Sati stretched out and held her sister’s hand”( *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, 16).

Through these characters, Tripathi illustrates that deformity does not equate to inferiority and that one’s value is determined by one’s actions and character, not by physical appearance. Literary works critique societal beauty standards and advocate for a more inclusive understanding of beauty that encompasses a variety of physical characteristics. This is in concordance with Susan Stewart, as she rightly puts it:

The body of the cultural other is by means of this metaphor both naturalized and domesticated in a process we might consider to be characteristic of colonization in general. For all colonization involves the taming of the beast by bestial methods and hence both the conversion and projection of the animal and human, difference and identity. On display, the freak represents the naming of the frontier and assurance that the wilderness, the outside, is now territory. (110)

Another critical aspect of deformity as otherness in the trilogy is its role in fostering empathy and unity among characters who might otherwise be divided. As Shiva comes to understand the Nagas and their struggles, he begins to see them not as monsters but as individuals with their own desires, fears, and dreams. This transformation is symbolic of the potential for empathy to bridge divides and dismantle prejudice. Shiva’s acceptance of the Nagas as part of his extended family, despite their deformities, reflects the power of compassion to overcome fear and hatred. By the end of the trilogy, Shiva’s alliance with the Nagas becomes a testament to the strength that comes from embracing diversity and rejecting superficial judgments.

The *Shiva Trilogy* uses the concept of deformity as a means to explore the construction of otherness and the consequences of societal prejudice. The depiction of the Nagas as deformed others reveals the biases within Meluhan society and underscores the dangers of defining people based on appearance. Through characters like Ganesh and Kali, Tripathi challenges traditional associations between deformity and monstrosity, emphasizing the importance of empathy and acceptance in building a just society. As Frances S. Connelly observes:

One can also take a historical and cultural view of these boundaries. For example, representations of a Nkisi from Congo or a Ganesha from India were neither intended nor defined as grotesques until they crossed into the European cultural sphere. As they were drawn into the peripheries of European art and aesthetics in the nineteenth century, these images were repeatedly described as monstrous and grotesque because of their perceived deformation.... (5)

The trilogy critiques the hypocrisy of a civilization that demonizes those who suffer from the consequences of its own actions, using deformity as a metaphor for the moral and ethical failings of those in power. By decentering conventional notions

of beauty and normalcy, Tripathi's narrative ultimately calls for a more inclusive understanding of humanity, where one's worth is determined by character and integrity rather than physical appearance. As Frances S. Connelly puts it:

Grotesque also describes the aberration from ideal form or from accepted convention, to create the misshapen, ugly, exaggerated, or even formless. This type runs the gamut from the deliberate exaggerations of caricature, to the unintended aberrations, accidents, and failures of the everyday world represented in realist imagery, to the dissolution of bodies, forms, and categories. (2)

The trilogy's emphasis on deformity and otherness also has broader implications for understanding the nature of heroism. Shiva's journey is not merely about defeating external threats; it is about confronting his own biases and learning to accept those who are different from him. His evolving relationship with the Nagas teaches him that true heroism lies in embracing diversity and protecting the vulnerable, regardless of their physical appearance. 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.

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