

Epistemologies of Empowerment: Feminist Re-Visions of the Divine in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*

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Abstract

This article explores the feminist reimagining of the divine feminine in Amish Tripathi's "Shiva Trilogy", emphasizing the empowering roles of characters like Sati and Kali within a contemporary retelling of Hindu mythology. By examining the epistemologies of empowerment embodied in these characters, the analysis delves into how Tripathi disrupts traditional patriarchal constructs surrounding femininity, divinity, and power. Sati and Kali are portrayed not as passive figures but as dynamic, empowered individuals whose resilience and strength challenge the restrictive roles typically assigned to women in myth. This article examines Tripathi's nuanced portrayal of female agency, solidarity, and self-worth as it redefines the feminine divine, encouraging readers to reconsider the transformative potential of mythology in reflecting and inspiring feminist ideals. Ultimately, the work illustrates how Tripathi's reinterpretation of these mythological figures transcends traditional narratives, providing a framework through which ancient myths can be engaged as living texts, relevant to contemporary discussions on gender and empowerment.

Keywords: Feminine divine, feminist mythology, female agency, empowerment, reimagining myth

Revisionist mythmaking involves reinterpreting history and mythology. Feminist academics have sought to recontextualise culture and the role of women within it.

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They endeavour to rewrite and reinterpret from the feminine perspective. They challenge the androcentric perspective in history and mythology by asserting that women are devalued and relegated to lower roles. Feminist revisionist mythmaking involves reinterpreting and recounting narratives, myths, and legends to explore the psychology of legendary figures. The *Shiva Trilogy* by Amish Tripathi offers a feminist reinterpretation of divinity, presenting intricate and empowered female characters as emblems of strength, resilience, and wisdom. Tripathi's depiction of divine entities such as Sati and Kali embody an epistemology of empowerment, challenging established notions of femininity and divinity within Hindu mythology. This approach provides readers with novel perspectives on power, agency, and identity. The narrative not only disrupts conventional gender roles but also encourages readers to scrutinize deeply held beliefs regarding the nature of divinity and women's roles in spiritual narratives. By portraying these formidable female characters as multidimensional individuals with distinct aspirations, imperfections, and autonomy, Tripathi constructs a more nuanced and inclusive representation of Hindu mythology. This feminist reimagining of ancient tales resonates with modern audiences, bridging the divide between traditional mythology and contemporary values while fostering critical examination of gender dynamics in both religious and secular spheres.

The feminist reinterpretation extends beyond central characters, encompassing a diverse array of female figures throughout the trilogy, each contributing unique insights and strengths to the narrative. According to Anant Sadashiv Altekar, "one of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilisation and to appreciate its excellence and realise its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of the women in it" (1). Tripathi's methodology not only challenges established gender roles within Hindu mythology but also prompts readers to reevaluate the potential for female leadership and divine representation in their personal lives and communities. By integrating elements of ancient wisdom with modern sensibilities, the *Shiva Trilogy* creates a rich tapestry that underscores the enduring relevance of mythological narratives in addressing contemporary social issues. *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision*, a theoretical article by Adrienne Rich, emphasizes the significance of rewriting traditional myths, legends, and fables from a gynocentric perspective. As expressed by Rich in this regard:

...serves as a counter-discourse that challenges the worldviews that are biased towards men. Re visioning is more than just a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival. It involves looking back, seeing with new eyes, and approaching an old text from a new critical perspective. For women, the desire to know oneself goes beyond a quest for identity and is a response to the self-destructiveness of a male-dominated culture. (4)

In past centuries, social and political philosophy, along with feminist ethics, posits a notion of women's agency that grants them the autonomy to contemplate their skills, exercise their will in actions, and live in accordance with their uniqueness, needs, and preferences. This topic is crucial as it addresses the enduring hostility

and malevolence faced by women; a primary impetus for feminist studies is to comprehensively comprehend the extensive continuum of subjugated women across many contexts and strata. A multitude of women acquiesce to the previous system owing to an absence of an adequate platform and longstanding timidity. Tradition has assigned a heterosexual paradigm and media portrayal that has significantly disadvantaged non-conformity. The issue of women's agency was inextricably linked to the notion of voice. Hence, as Schaberg underlines, "patriarchal images of women were used to blame them, to warn them, to confine them, to undermine their self-confidence and talents, to wipe out their history and to idealize them" (82). Similarly, Rich, in Kramarae and Treichler's *A Feminist Dictionary*, says, "patriarchy refers not only to the prevention of women from occupying powerful positions in society, but it also creates the negative social view that men attach to women" (323). Another scholar, Nelle Morton views patriarchy, as follows:

It is a way of structuring reality in terms of good/evil, redemption/guilt, authority/obedience, reward/punishment, power/powerlessness, haves and have-nots, and master/slave. The first in each opposite was assigned to the patriarchal father, or the patriarch's Father God, frequently indistinguishable from one another. The second refers to women as "the other" who could be exploited. The father did the naming, the owning, the controlling, the ordering, the forgiving, the giving, considering himself capable of making the best decisions for all. (qtd. in *Women's Lives, Men's Myths* 47)

Through Sati, Tripathi explores a character often revered for her loyalty and sacrifice in traditional mythology, transforming her into a fierce warrior with an unwavering sense of justice and integrity. In *The Immortals of Meluha*, Sati initially appears as a reserved figure bound by the societal constraints imposed on her as a Vikarma those considered cursed or untouchable. As Tripathi writes:

'Vikarma people, my Lord,' said Nandi sighing deeply, are people who have been punished in this birth for the sins of their previous birth. Hence, they have to live this life out with dignity and tolerate their present sufferings with grace. This is the only way they can wipe their karma clean of the sins of their previous births. Vikarma men have their own order of penance and women have their own order. ... They have to pray for forgiveness every month to Lord Agni, the purifying Fire God, through a specifically mandated puja. They are not allowed to marry since they may contaminate others with their bad fate. They are not allowed to touch any person who is not related to them or is not part of their daily life. There are many other conditions as well that I am not completely aware of. (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 94-5)

Despite this stigma, Sati embodies self-worth and moral integrity, refusing to compromise her values or rely on external validation. For instance, in her interactions with Shiva, she makes clear her refusal to accept sympathy, portraying

herself as a woman defined not by societal labels but by her actions and convictions. Tripathi's portrayal of Sati challenges the archetypal sacrificial woman, reconfiguring her as a figure of dignity and empowerment. This reimagining continues as Sati becomes increasingly central to the trilogy's narrative. Her struggle to be seen and respected as an individual, independent of the labels and roles imposed upon her, aligns with feminist theories of self-identity and agency. Her resilience in the face of adversity demonstrates that strength and power can exist within the bounds of compassion and empathy, qualities often relegated to the feminine sphere and undervalued in traditional narratives. Pramod K. Nayar in *Reading Culture: Theory, Praxis, Politics* (2006) brings out the characteristic features of a typical superhero, in the chapter titled 'Panel Culture: The Comic Book'. According to him "the hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law" (100). Joseph Campbell also speaks about the moral objective of a hero, "The moral objective is that of saving a person, or supporting an idea. The hero sacrifices himself for something-that's the morality of it" (156)

In positioning Sati as an equal to Shiva, Tripathi effectively critiques the hierarchy that often places female figures in secondary roles, instead offering a vision of partnership rooted in mutual respect and shared purpose. Sati's journey, however, is not just about individual empowerment; it also illuminates the larger societal structures that seek to suppress women's agency. Tripathi uses her character to comment on issues of caste, purity, and societal judgment, intertwining these themes with feminist ideals of equality and resistance against marginalization. Sati's unwillingness to accept the limitations imposed by the Vikarma label highlights her defiance against systems that define individuals by arbitrary standards. When she eventually overcomes these societal constraints, her triumph is not only personal but representative of a broader liberation from the structures of oppression that seek to define and confine women.

She had tolerated too many insults for too long And she had endured them with quiet dignity. But this time, this man had insulted Shiva. Her Shiva, she finally acknowledged to herself.

I invoke the right of *Agnipariksha*, said Sati, back in control.

The stunned onlookers could not believe their ears. A trial by fire!

This was getting worse by the minute. Agnipariksha, a duel unto death, enabled a contestant to challenge an unjust tormentor. It was called Agnipariksha as combat would be conducted within a ring of fire. There was no escape from the ring. The duellists had to keep fighting till one person either surrendered or died. An Agnipariksha was extremely rare these days. And for a woman to invoke the right was almost unheard of. (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 229)

Kali, Sati's sister, embodies another form of empowered femininity within the trilogy. Where Sati's strength is rooted in moral integrity and justice, Kali's is an expression of defiance and retribution. Her physical appearance—marked by

deformity—has led her to be marginalized and feared, yet Kali embraces her identity with a fierce pride, challenging the notion that beauty and purity are prerequisites for respect. In *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, Kali's character defies the traditional associations of physical form with inner worth, serving as a symbol of unfiltered power and unapologetic self-acceptance. Through her, Tripathi dismantles the conventional associations of beauty, showing that divine feminine strength can manifest in various forms, even those that society may consider undesirable or threatening. According to feminist theorist Lois McNay, the agency is "the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities." (10). Kali's refusal to be defined by her deformity parallels feminist discourses that reject societal standards of beauty as markers of worth, reasserting that power and autonomy lie within one's acceptance and ownership of self.

The friendship and solidarity between Sati and Kali further illustrate a feminist vision of empowerment. Instead of embodying competition or rivalry—common tropes in traditional narratives involving women—Tripathi's portrayal of their relationship emphasizes mutual support, compassion, and shared purpose. Sati's acceptance of Kali as her sister, despite the social stigma attached to her deformity, reinforces the importance of solidarity and compassion. It is evident when she speaks to the Kali, "'No arguments, Kali,'... 'Both of you are coming to Kashi. We travel when you are strong enough to do so.' Kali stared at Sati, at a loss for words. 'You are my sister. I don't care what society says. If they accept me, they will accept you. If they reject you, I leave this society too'" (*The Secret of the Nagas*, 257). This bond serves as a counter-narrative to patriarchal structures that often isolate women, emphasizing instead the strength found in unity and mutual support. Their relationship exemplifies feminist ideals of sisterhood, wherein women support each other in the face of oppression rather than succumb to societal pressures that pit them against one another. According to Bell Hooks, "it would be psychologically demoralizing for these women to bond with other women on the basis of shared victimization. They bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources. This is the bonding the feminist movement should encourage. It is this type of bonding that is the essence of sisterhood (*Feminist Theory* 45).

Tripathi's feminist reinterpretation of divinity also extends to the portrayal of motherhood within the trilogy. In traditional Hindu mythology, motherhood is revered yet often confined to a nurturing, sacrificial role. In the *Shiva Trilogy*, however, motherhood becomes a form of resistance and strength. Sati's role as a mother and protector reinforces the idea that nurturing and warrior-like qualities can coexist harmoniously. Her fierce defense of her family and people is not a departure from her femininity but an extension of it, suggesting that feminine power is multifaceted and cannot be confined to a single role. This portrayal aligns with contemporary feminist discourses that challenge the restrictive roles often assigned to women, advocating instead for a vision of femininity that embraces complexity and agency.

Shiva's character, too, serves as a foil to these empowered female figures, embodying a masculinity that respects and reveres the feminine. Shiva demonstrates feminist ideals even before his romantic involvement with Sati, as evidenced by his critique of the Vikarma law. He expresses his opinion, stating, "That sounds pretty ridiculous to me. A woman could have given birth to a still born child simply because she did not take proper care while she was pregnant, or it could just be a disease. How can anyone say that she is being punished for the sins of her previous birth?" (*The Immortals of Meluha*, 96). His reverence for Sati as an equal partner rather than a subordinate exemplifies a feminist partnership model, wherein both individuals maintain their identities and respect each other's autonomy. For instance, the protagonist Shiva in the novel *The Immortals of Meluha*, "Why would I have to be purified for touching sati? I want to spend all my remaining year touching her in every possible way. Am I going to keep on undergoing a shudhikaran everyday? Ridiculous!" (106) (Italics in original). Shiva's growth throughout the trilogy is deeply influenced by his interactions with the women around him, particularly Sati, whose moral compass and strength of character provide him with guidance and perspective. These dynamic challenges the traditional male-centric narratives in mythology, placing the feminine divine at the heart of the protagonist's journey and transformation.

The trilogy also challenges the dichotomy of good versus evil traditionally depicted in mythology, particularly concerning the feminine divine. In Tripathi's narrative, feminine power is not merely nurturing or vengeful; it embodies a balance between creation and destruction, compassion and retribution. This complex portrayal aligns with the Shakti tradition in Hinduism, wherein the goddess is worshipped not only as a mother and nurturer but also as a fierce warrior capable of destruction. Through Sati and Kali, Tripathi reinforces that the divine feminine cannot be confined to binary interpretations; it encompasses a spectrum of qualities that together form a holistic representation of power and agency.

Revisionist mythology writers have transcended the boundaries of oppressive language, forging new spaces for female perspectives and engagement. These writers amplify the voices of overlooked women, reinterpret their stories, and bring them to light, exploring hidden meanings and crafting an alternate world for women within traditional and predominantly patriarchal texts. Through their work, female revisionist authors challenge original texts, initiating dialogues with patriarchal ideologies. In this way, as Adrienne Rich asserts, feminist revisionist myth-making becomes a tool of defiance: "Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival" (qtd. in Beyer 18). Tripathi's trilogy engages with feminist epistemology by challenging the traditional representations of women in mythology. His female characters exhibit a self-awareness and agency that transcends the conventional depictions of women as passive, sacrificial, or subordinate. Instead, Tripathi offers a vision of the divine that is inextricably linked with empowerment, autonomy, and self-determination. In doing so, he not only

revises mythological narratives but also addresses contemporary feminist concerns, encouraging readers to reevaluate the roles and representations of women in both ancient texts and modern society. As Lundholt notes, “counternarratives play a role in storytellers positioning themselves against, or critiquing, the themes and ideologies of master narratives” (421).

The epistemologies of empowerment in the *Shiva Trilogy* serve as a reminder of the transformative potential of mythology. By reimagining female divinity through a feminist lens, Tripathi provides readers with an alternative narrative that celebrates the divine feminine in all its complexity. His characters remind us that the divine is not an abstract ideal but a living, evolving force that reflects the struggles, triumphs, and aspirations of those who seek to understand it. In reshaping these narratives, Tripathi invites us to consider how myths can serve as tools for empowerment, inspiring us to challenge the structures that seek to define and limit us.

Through Sati and Kali, the *Shiva Trilogy* illustrates how myth can be used to explore themes of gender, power, and identity, highlighting the ways in which the divine feminine can inspire resilience and self-worth. This re-visioning of the feminine divine resonates with one of the intellectual sayings of Mary Wollstonecraft: “I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves” (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* 1792), which seek to dismantle the stereotypes and limitations imposed on women. By placing empowered female characters at the center of his narrative, Tripathi reaffirms the relevance of mythology as a means of exploring and challenging societal norms. His work demonstrates that the divine is not merely a reflection of tradition but a dynamic force that can be continually reinterpreted and redefined.

The *Shiva Trilogy* presents a profound re-visioning of the feminine divine that aligns with contemporary feminist ideals. Through the characters of Sati and Kali, Tripathi not only honors traditional narratives but also critiques and redefines them, offering models of divinity that celebrate empowerment, resilience, and solidarity among women. By emphasizing the complexities of these characters and their experiences, the trilogy illustrates how ancient myths can be revitalized to reflect the diverse expressions of female agency in today’s world. In doing so, Tripathi invites readers to engage with mythology as a living tradition that holds the potential for transformation and empowerment. The epistemologies of empowerment highlighted in the trilogy encourage a reevaluation of the divine, showcasing how feminist perspectives can inform and enrich our understanding of myth and identity.

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