



Reimagining Disability in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*: A Disability Studies Perspective

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Abstract

Disability has traditionally been represented in mythology and literature either as a symbol of divine punishment or as a marker of moral deficiency. Contemporary Disability Studies challenges these assumptions by arguing that disability is not merely a medical condition but also a social and cultural construct. Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (*The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*) offers a unique reinterpretation of disability through the representation of the Nagas, individuals born with physical deformities and bodily differences. Rather than depicting them as monsters or cursed beings, Tripathi exposes the prejudice and exclusion imposed upon them by society. This article examines the trilogy through the lens of Disability Theory, particularly the works of Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Tom Shakespeare. It argues that the trilogy critiques ableist social structures and advocates for inclusion, dignity, and the recognition of bodily diversity.

Keywords: *Disability Studies, Ableism, Nagas, Social Model of Disability, Bodily Difference*

Introduction

Literature has often portrayed disabled bodies as symbols of tragedy, weakness, or moral corruption. From ancient myths to modern fiction, physical difference has frequently been associated with social exclusion. Disability Studies emerged as a critical response to such representations and challenged the assumption that disability is solely a medical problem. Instead, scholars argue that societies create disability through discrimination, stigma, and inaccessible social structures. Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* presents a powerful exploration of these issues through the Nagas, a community of people born with physical deformities. In Meluhan society, Nagas are feared, ostracized, and treated as aberrations. Their exclusion is not caused merely by their bodily conditions but by societal attitudes toward physical difference. Through characters such as Kali, Ganesh, and the Naga community, Tripathi questions dominant notions of normality and reveals the cruelty of ableist social systems. The trilogy therefore provides fertile ground for Disability Studies because it demonstrates how disability is socially constructed and how marginalized bodies challenge established norms of perfection and beauty.



Disability Studies distinguishes between impairment and disability. Impairment refers to a bodily condition, while disability emerges from social barriers and discriminatory attitudes. Lennard J. Davis argues that modern society is obsessed with the concept of "normality" and marginalizes bodies that deviate from this standard. Davis writes: "The concept of the norm, unlike that of the ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm" (Davis 85). This theoretical perspective is highly relevant to the Nagas. Their physical differences become problematic not because they are incapable of living meaningful lives but because society defines them as abnormal. The Meluhans construct an ideal image of bodily perfection and classify anyone who falls outside that ideal as defective.

Similarly, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that disability is produced through cultural practices that label certain bodies as undesirable. According to her, societies create "normate" identities that privilege certain bodies while excluding others. The Nagas are victims of such normate thinking because they are judged according to standards they did not create. The Nagas are perhaps the most significant representation of disability in contemporary Indian mythological fiction. Many are born with extra limbs, skin abnormalities, facial disfigurements, or other physical differences. Because of these conditions, they are expelled from mainstream society. Tripathi vividly describes their suffering: "The Nagas had been rejected by society. They had been branded as cursed, dangerous, and unworthy of acceptance."

This exclusion reflects the social model of disability. The Nagas' greatest challenge is not their physical condition but the discrimination they face. They are denied dignity, belonging, and equal participation in society. The trilogy reveals how fear of bodily difference creates social segregation. Meluhans do not evaluate Nagas based on their abilities, intelligence, or character. Instead, they reduce them to their physical appearance. This mirrors real-world experiences of disabled individuals who encounter prejudice because society values bodily perfection over human worth.

Another myth that is firmly upheld is that disabled people are dependent and non-disabled people are independent. No one is actually independent. This is a myth perpetuated by disablism and driven by capitalism. We are all actually interdependent. Chances are, disabled or not, you do not grow all of your food, build your own house, or make your own clothing. The difference is that non-disabled people have had their dependencies normalized while disabled people's needs are treated as exceptional. The world is designed to accommodate certain bodies and then calls those bodies independent while others are made to feel burdensome. (Withers 85)

Kali represents one of the most complex disabled characters in the trilogy. Born with severe physical deformities, she experiences both disability-based discrimination and gender-based oppression. Her life demonstrates the intersection of disability and feminism. As a woman with visible bodily differences, Kali is treated as socially undesirable. However, Tripathi refuses to portray her as



weak or pitiable. She emerges as a courageous leader who commands respect and displays extraordinary strength.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that disabled women often experience "double discrimination" because they are marginalized both as women and as disabled individuals. Kali's experiences reflect this reality. Society evaluates her body before recognizing her abilities. Yet her character disrupts conventional assumptions about beauty, femininity, and capability. She demonstrates that leadership, intelligence, and courage are not dependent upon bodily conformity. Kali's journey therefore challenges ableist and patriarchal structures simultaneously. Her character suggests that social value should be determined by actions and character rather than physical appearance.

Ganesh's story is perhaps the clearest illustration of disability stigma in the trilogy. Born with physical abnormalities, he is separated from his mother and forced into exile. His suffering originates not from his condition but from social rejection. The stigma surrounding Ganesh reflects what Erving Goffman describes as the process through which society labels certain individuals as "other." Once categorized as abnormal, such individuals become targets of exclusion and discrimination. Ganesh's life illustrates this phenomenon. He is denied family relationships, social acceptance, and emotional belonging because of his appearance. Nevertheless, he grows into a compassionate and heroic figure. His character exposes the irrationality of ableist prejudice. Society views him as defective, yet he embodies many of the virtues celebrated by that same society. Through Ganesh, Tripathi demonstrates that disability does not diminish humanity or moral worth.

Traditional approaches to disability often adopt what scholars call the medical model. This model views disability as an individual defect requiring correction or cure. In contrast, the social model argues that societal barriers create disability. The treatment of Nagas in the trilogy critiques the medical model. Meluhan society attempts to classify bodily difference as a problem that must be hidden or excluded. However, the narrative gradually reveals that the real problem lies in social attitudes. Tom Shakespeare observes: "People are disabled by society, not simply by their bodies." This statement encapsulates the central message of the trilogy. The Nagas become disabled because society denies them inclusion, opportunity, and respect. When these barriers are challenged, their capabilities become visible.

Tripathi therefore shifts attention away from bodily impairment and toward social responsibility. One of the trilogy's central themes is the danger of perfectionism. Meluha prides itself on order, purity, and physical excellence. Yet this obsession with perfection ultimately leads to injustice. Disability Studies scholars argue that the pursuit of bodily perfection often produces exclusionary practices. The Nagas become victims of this ideology because they do not fit accepted standards of beauty and normality.

The trilogy repeatedly demonstrates that perfection is an illusion. Characters considered physically perfect frequently commit immoral acts, while those deemed defective often display remarkable



compassion and courage. This inversion challenges conventional assumptions and suggests that human diversity should be embraced rather than feared.

By the conclusion of the trilogy, Shiva recognizes that the suffering of the Nagas is a consequence of systemic prejudice. Their liberation symbolizes the possibility of a more inclusive society. The narrative advocates a vision of social justice grounded in equality and dignity. Rather than demanding that disabled individuals conform to dominant norms, the trilogy suggests that society itself must change. This message aligns closely with contemporary Disability Studies, which emphasizes accessibility, inclusion, and respect for bodily diversity. The transformation in societal attitudes toward the Nagas reflects the broader goal of disability activism: creating communities where difference is accepted rather than stigmatized.

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* offers a compelling exploration of disability through its portrayal of the Nagas, Kali, and Ganesh. Applying Disability Theory reveals that the trilogy is not merely a mythological adventure but also a critique of ableism and social exclusion. The narrative demonstrates that disability is often created by cultural attitudes rather than physical impairments themselves. Through the experiences of marginalized characters, Tripathi challenges dominant notions of normality, beauty, and perfection. The trilogy ultimately advocates an inclusive vision of humanity in which dignity and worth are not determined by bodily conformity. By foregrounding the struggles of physically different individuals, *The Shiva Trilogy* contributes to contemporary discussions of disability, identity, and social justice.

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