

# Myth and History in Harappa Trilogy

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## ABSTRACT

Myth and Mythology are part of any culture and civilization that interacts and produces cultural ethos and traditions. Indian subcontinent being home of many religion and cultures, is a large production place for myth. Fiction is often a tool which uses myth either to affirm it or to subvert it. Indian mythological fiction has become a genre in itself in last some years. Harappa is a notable work in the Indian English space in this genre. This paper aims to analyze it and its form by using comparative methodology. It will use structural reading and genre theory to understand the form of Harappa in relation to other notable works in Indian mythological fiction. It will also try to point out how myth plays a role in making and unmaking of a genre. How author can use myth to change form and genre of a particular text.

## 1. Indian Mythological Fiction as a Genre

It is not exaggeration to say that *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010) by Amish created a market space for a particular kind of fiction in Indian English Space. It is often labelled as 'Indian Mythological Fiction'. Mythological fiction without prefix 'Indian' is a conceived genre across world. From Greek drama to latest novel by Dan Brown can be accommodated within this genre. Prefix 'Indian' makes further distinction there. It concerns mythology of or from India.

There has always been a steady flow of works which tells stories from Indian mythology in Indian English Space for many decades. Given the vastness of Indian mythology it is no wonder that variety of myths have been presented, preferably in novel form. Some serious studies of characters like *The Palace of Illusion* (2008), *Jaya: An Illustrated retelling of Mahabharata*(2010), *Asura: Tale of Vanquished*(2012) etc. have been popular among critics and general readers.

However, the significance of the *Immortals of Meluha* lies in author's treatment of the mythological content. Instead of basing his novel into fantasy (often primary mode for mythological fiction), Amish tries to see myth as history. His overt use of realism and structure of novel as a thriller can be called a case of Hybrid Genre (O'Sullivan, 1994). Amish breaks connection of fantasy with mythology and bases it into history. Chapter often indicated time period like 1900 BC. (Amish, 1) It spawned *Shiva Trilogy*, which became a milestone in Indian Popular Fiction. It led other authors to follow similar model and Indian mythological fiction become a major genre in Indian English Space.

## 2. Harappa trilogy's case

*Harappa* (2018) is a novel that is Indian mythological fiction in above sense. It takes up myths found in scriptures of Hinduism and presents it as history. It draws upon more myths than *Shiva Trilogy*. It takes up myths of *Manu smriti*, *Matsya Avatar*, *Saptrishis* etc. and combines it with elements from Hindu faith like *tantric* and *sheshnaga*. Author Vineet Bajpai also introduces various elements of thrillers like *conspiracy*, *fight*, *deceptions* etc. Scale of the novel becomes larger as it tries to occupy more time and space. It starts in 1700 BCE and

extends till present time. It also goes beyond cultural and geographical borders of 'Indian', and creates space to occupy French, Italian and American characters. Its sequels namely *Pralay* (2018) and *Kashi*(2018) makes it a trilogy which is identified as *Harappa trilogy*.

Harappa trilogy follows Shiva trilogy in world building and character designs. Both has protagonists who are physically powerful and have intelligence to complete great tasks. Both trilogy features at more than one female characters who are warriors and also love interest of protagonists. These similarities are conventional in Indian literature. It even overthrows radical depictions of female characters in other mythological novels like *The Palace of Illusion* (2008) and *Jaya: An Illustrated retelling of Mahabharata*(2010). Both trilogy features cast of side characters who serves for limited interests but gives multidimensions to the story. Character of *Ganesh* and *Matsya* can be prime example of that.

Harappa trilogy has some elements varying from conventions set by Shiva trilogy. Shiva trilogy uses realism at its core and often delves into philosophical discussion, mainly seen in conversations of Shiva with temple priest Vasudeva throughout the trilogy. These discussion serves to as vehicles for motives of Shiva and other characters. Harappa trilogy also uses discussion, but they serve as vehicles for expositions. Key difference is time. Shiva trilogy concerns itself with its present time and Harappa trilogy is about multiple timelines. So, historical information (within its narrative) becomes necessary to be imparted with. Bajpai uses discussion between Dwarka Shastri and Vidut serves as frame narrative to tell mythological stories as historical happenings. One can rightly argue that Harappa trilogy is set in one geographical location, that is city of Kashi. Unlike Shiva trilogy, where Shiva being migrant moves across Indian subcontinent and with-it story moves to different geographical locations. This difference is key in understanding both trilogy and differences they project within genre of Indian Mythological Fiction.

Shiva trilogy can be structurally called what Campbell calls 'the hero's journey' (Campbell 1990). Shiva is the hero who goes on a journey/quest and learns out of that experience. Realism is needed to show him as psychologically flawed and

troubled character. This is the reason that compels author to present myth as history. His quest for peace takes him to Meluha, his quest to destroy Chandravanshis takes him to Swadweep, where after learning truth, Naga attack takes him further and so on. This journey ends with Shiva fulfilling his quest of destroying evil and returning to mount Kailash.

Harappa trilogy is dissimilar to that as it has no change of place. Instead it has change of time. Narrative of Vidyut and present time intermingles with that of Vivasvan Pujari and past. Both narratives run parallelly often answering questions posed in one timeline in other. This makes Harappa somewhat more reliant on exposition and thus author evades consistent use of realism and takes refuge in supernatural devices. This little change poses question for the genre of the text and position of it in Indian mythological fiction. However, no literature is fixed body of repertoires. In Itamar Even-Zohar's terms a literature is a 'polysystem', which is 'The complex of activities, or any section thereof, for which systemic relations can be hypothesized to support the option of considering them literary.' (Even-Zohar 1990) Indian English is such complex of activities where genres also have systemic relations.

### 3. Myth in Genres

As established before Indian English writers have used myths to serve various purposes. From feminist perspectives to rewriting they have experimented with genre. Distinction in narrative style in Harappa Trilogy can be seen indebted to fiction of Ashvin Sanghi (1969- ), who uses two timelines, of past and present to ground a mythological tale in history. For example, myth of Jesus's life in India in *The Rozabal Line* (2007), myth of Philosopher's stone in *The Krishna Key* (2012) etc. These novels however borrowed narrative frames from Dan Brown, known for *The Da Vinci Code* (2000) which presents myth of holy grail as historical truth. But notable thing about these novels are that they use myth as background to justify actions in the present, myth seem 'passive' in the course of the action.

Harappa only takes narrative form from this model and combines it with Amish's myth as history model of Shiva trilogy. Instead of making Harappa narrative focused in present time Bajpai goes on lengths to depict mythological happenings, almost to the extent where Vidyut and Dwarka Shastri's conversation becomes tool for exposition. Bajpai structures

myth as 'real' and presents known recorded history, especially of Harappa or Indus valley civilization as myth created by historians. Which becomes the radical idea as the book narrative progresses.

This shows that myth and mythological fiction has fluid form and it can be changed to accommodate certain genre tropes into it. For example, Shiva trilogy combines Mythological fiction with thriller and mystery genre. Especially Shiva's quest to search for evil can also be seen in parallel to a detective looking for the identity of a murderer. Thriller tropes like physical fights, intellectual strategies for defeating an enemy or careful revelation for twists and turns in the narratives can be seen throughout trilogy. What Ashvin Sanghi, also Dan Brown, does is combining myth into a thriller. However, Bajpai's approach is more radical in these terms.

He presents a mythological story in realism. Two narratives serve as complimentary to each other. He puts emphasis on history, character of Vidyut serves as counter view who questions myths. Author establishes myth as history as he makes Vidyut believe in narrative told by Dwarka Shastri. After establishing myth as 'real' history author presents little action in present timeline, drawing upon elements of espionage thriller and at the climax of the first novel he uses elements of action thriller.

Another element which sets it apart from trend set by Shiva trilogy is that Harappa trilogy doesn't shy away from using supernatural. Saptrishi's subplot hinges on supernatural. Dwarka Shastri's fight with other spirits via curses and spells seem out of place in the narrative which uses realism, but it adds supernatural dimensions to in order to justify occult practices in Hinduism. Character of Dwarka Shastri is a Gandalf like character, both thematically and structurally.

Harappa trilogy marks a new change in Indian Mythological Fiction and also shows development of a genre which is embodied of thriller, mystery, fantasy and mythological fiction.

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