

From Tribal Chief to Mahadev: The Construction of Heroic Identity in Amish Tripathi's the Immortals of Meluha

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ABSTRACT

Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), the first novel of the *Shiva Trilogy*, reimagines Shiva by presenting him initially not as a supernatural deity but as a human leader whose heroic and divine identities gradually emerge through experience, choice, and moral responsibility. This paper examines Shiva's transformation from the chief of a Himalayan tribe into the Neelkanth and, ultimately, towards the figure recognised as Mahadev. Rather than treating divinity as an inherent attribute, Tripathi constructs Shiva's heroic identity through a progressive process of human struggle, ethical decision-making, leadership, and social responsibility. His migration to Meluha marks a decisive transition from the relatively limited responsibilities of tribal leadership to engagement with a complex civilisation shaped by political conflict, social hierarchy, religious belief, and competing perceptions of good and evil. Although the Meluhans identify Shiva as the prophesied Neelkanth, he initially remains sceptical of the divine role imposed upon him. His encounters with Sati, Daksha, Ayurvati, Nandi, and the people and institutions of Meluha gradually reshape his understanding of duty, justice, leadership, and human suffering. Drawing primarily on Joseph Campbell's concept of the hero's journey and supported by Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism and Roland Barthes's conception of myth, the study analyses the major stages in Shiva's evolving heroic consciousness. It argues that Tripathi reverses the conventional process of mythological representation by moving from humanity towards divinity rather than from divinity towards humanisation. Shiva becomes heroic not because of predetermined supernatural status but because his actions demonstrate courage, compassion, ethical judgement, and willingness to accept responsibility for others. His transformation therefore represents a movement from physical prowess to moral authority and from an externally attributed identity to a consciously assumed social and ethical responsibility. Through this reconstruction, Tripathi presents heroism as an evolving human potential in which

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extraordinary status is achieved through choices, actions, and commitment to the larger good.

Index Terms: Amish Tripathi, *The Immortals of Meluha*, Shiva, heroic identity, humanisation, Neelkanth, Mahadev, hero's journey, archetypal criticism, mythological fiction.

1. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH GAP

Myth continues to occupy an important position in contemporary Indian English fiction because it provides writers with a familiar cultural framework through which changing questions of identity, morality, leadership, social organisation, and individual choice can be explored. Modern retellings do not necessarily reproduce traditional narratives in their received forms. Instead, they often relocate familiar characters and symbols within new historical, psychological, and social contexts. This process enables mythological figures to acquire contemporary relevance without entirely losing their connection with cultural memory. Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), the first volume of the *Shiva Trilogy*, is a significant example of this tendency. The novel reimagines Shiva not initially as a god but as a human tribal chief whose experiences gradually lead towards the identity culturally associated with Mahadev.

Tripathi's narrative begins with Shiva as the leader of the Gunas, a Himalayan tribe living near Mount Kailash. He is courageous and militarily capable, but he is also subject to recognisably human emotions and limitations. He experiences anger, uncertainty, affection, anxiety, attraction, guilt, and doubt. More importantly, he does not possess prior knowledge of a divine mission. His immediate concern is the survival and welfare of his people. The decision to migrate from Mount Kailash to Meluha consequently begins as a practical response to insecurity rather than as a conscious quest for heroic greatness. This human starting point is essential to the novel's reconstruction of Shiva.

The movement into Meluha changes both Shiva's circumstances and the scale of his

responsibility. Meluha is presented as an organised and prosperous civilisation governed by elaborate social, political, and moral systems. Soon after Shiva's arrival, the consumption of Somras causes his throat to turn blue. The Meluhans interpret this physical transformation as fulfilment of an ancient prophecy and identify him as the Neelkanth, the saviour expected to confront evil. Shiva is therefore given an extraordinary public identity before he has psychologically or morally accepted it. A productive tension consequently develops between Shiva as he understands himself and Shiva as society interprets him.

This tension provides the starting point for the present study. The blue throat gives Shiva recognition, but recognition alone does not establish heroic greatness. Tripathi repeatedly places him in situations that require him to determine what the Neelkanth identity should mean in practice. His relationships with Sati, Nandi, Ayurvati, Daksha, the Gunas, and the people of Meluha broaden his emotional and social awareness. His involvement in warfare tests his leadership, while his encounters with Meluhan institutions and competing political communities increasingly complicate the apparently straightforward distinction between good and evil. Heroic identity thus develops through experience rather than being completed by prophecy.

The novel is especially significant because it reverses a familiar direction in mythological representation. A modern retelling may humanise a deity by attributing ordinary emotions and psychological conflicts to an already divine figure. Tripathi adopts a more complex strategy. He begins with humanity and gradually constructs the conditions under which the human protagonist may acquire mythic

significance. The culturally familiar Mahadev becomes an anticipated destination rather than an unquestioned point of departure. The reader recognises Shiva's mythological identity, while Shiva himself must grow towards the moral responsibility associated with it.

Existing scholarship on Tripathi's fiction has approached the *Shiva Trilogy* from several perspectives. Studies have examined the contemporisation of mythology, demythologisation and remythologisation, cultural adaptation, social hierarchy, gender, power, environmental concerns, leadership, and the human representation of divinity. More recent research has also examined *The Immortals of Meluha* through Joseph Campbell's monomyth, particularly Shiva's departure from his tribal world and his progression through recognisable stages of heroic adventure. Such studies have established the importance of the hero's journey to Tripathi's narrative and have demonstrated how mythological material is adapted for contemporary readers.

Nevertheless, a specific critical space remains insufficiently examined. The structural resemblance between Shiva's journey and Campbell's monomyth does not by itself explain how a human tribal leader gradually becomes worthy of the heroic and eventually divine identity that other characters attribute to him. Similarly, studies of humanisation often concentrate on Tripathi's representation of Shiva as emotionally accessible but do not fully connect that humanity with the progressive construction of heroic authority. The relationship between personal experience, social recognition, archetypal heroism, cultural symbolism, and moral transformation therefore requires closer attention.

The present study addresses this gap by examining Shiva's development as a process of heroic identity construction. Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero's journey provides the principal framework for tracing movement, trial, and transformation. Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism supplements Campbell by explaining how Shiva gradually occupies a recognisable

heroic position in relation to a larger community. Roland Barthes's conception of myth provides a further perspective on how culturally familiar signs—particularly Shiva, Neelkanth, and Mahadev—acquire reconstructed meanings within Tripathi's fictional world. The three perspectives may therefore be understood through the interconnected movement of journey, archetype, and myth.

This study does not attempt to force *The Immortals of Meluha* into every stage of Campbell's monomyth. Since the novel is only the first volume of the trilogy, Shiva's complete return and final transformation lie beyond its narrative limits. The analysis instead concentrates on departure, initiation, expanding responsibility, and emerging transformation. It argues that Tripathi constructs Shiva's heroic identity through a gradual movement from tribal responsibility to public leadership, from physical courage to moral courage, from externally imposed recognition to internally developed responsibility, and from inherited definitions of good and evil towards independent ethical judgement. In this reconstruction, the Neelkanth may be identified by prophecy, but the movement towards Mahadev must be earned through human choices. The novel therefore presents divinity not as the starting explanation of Shiva's greatness but as the mythic possibility generated by an expanding moral consciousness.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* has attracted considerable critical attention because of its distinctive treatment of mythology, history, social institutions, morality, and popular culture. A recurring concern in this scholarship is Tripathi's transformation of familiar mythological figures into characters who function within a largely human and historically imagined world. Critics have examined this transformation through approaches ranging from myth criticism and archetypal studies to gender, social hierarchy, political power, environmental concerns, and contemporary cultural interpretation. These studies provide an important foundation for examining Shiva's

development in *The Immortals of Meluha*, although the gradual construction of his heroic identity requires further critical attention.

Tiwari and Khan (2021) examine Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* in relation to Indian mythology and its significance within contemporary Indian literature. Their study draws attention to the manner in which Tripathi reshapes traditional mythological material for modern readers while retaining recognisable elements associated with Shiva. Their analysis is useful in establishing the trilogy as a form of contemporary mythological reconstruction. However, its broad treatment of the trilogy leaves scope for a more concentrated examination of how the first novel constructs Shiva's heroic identity through a sequence of human experiences and ethical decisions.

Bala (2024) approaches the trilogy through the contemporisation of the Shiva myth and considers the ways in which traditional material is adapted to address contemporary concerns. The study identifies issues such as social marginalisation, environmental responsibility, gender, and changing cultural values within Tripathi's mythological world. This perspective demonstrates that the novels do not merely reproduce inherited stories but use mythology as a flexible medium for engaging with present-day questions. Such contemporisation is particularly relevant to Shiva's character because his greatness is represented through concerns that modern readers can recognise: leadership, justice, individual choice, responsibility, and resistance to discriminatory practices.

Aakarsh (2024), in a literary review of *The Immortals of Meluha*, discusses the novel's processes of demythologisation and remythologisation, its world-building, and the human qualities attributed to Shiva. The study recognises the importance of presenting the protagonist with human limitations before allowing him to acquire extraordinary significance. This observation is closely related to the present enquiry. Nevertheless, humanisation alone does not explain the complete process at work in the novel. Tripathi not only makes Shiva

human; he gradually shows how human qualities such as courage, affection, doubt, compassion, and responsibility contribute to the creation of heroic stature.

Recent scholarship has given greater attention to the structural and narrative dimensions of Shiva's transformation. Gopi and Dhanam (2025) examine storytelling traditions and modern retelling in the *Shiva Trilogy*. They emphasise Tripathi's combination of inherited mythology with rationalised explanations, philosophical reinterpretation, and contemporary narrative techniques. Their study demonstrates how familiar mythic material is reorganised within a modern fictional framework. This interaction between cultural familiarity and narrative innovation is especially important to the present study because readers recognise Shiva's mythological destination even while the fictional character remains unaware of it.

Campbell's monomyth has also become an important framework in recent studies of the novel. Kawde (2025) reads *The Immortals of Meluha* through Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, identifying correspondences between Shiva's experiences and the broad pattern of separation, initiation, and return. Such a reading establishes that Shiva's movement from his tribal environment into Meluha can productively be interpreted as a heroic journey. It also demonstrates the usefulness of Campbell for understanding the structural progression of the protagonist. The present study builds upon this approach but shifts attention from structural correspondence to the question of identity: not merely whether Shiva follows a heroic journey, but how participation in that journey changes the kind of person and leader he becomes.

Nagapushpam and Sathya Kala (2025) offer an even more focused Campbellian interpretation in their study of Shiva's movement from tribal leader to chosen figure. Concentrating on the departure phase, they identify elements corresponding to the call to adventure, refusal, supernatural aid, crossing of the first threshold, and the belly of the whale. Their analysis is particularly relevant because it establishes the

significance of Shiva's departure from the familiar world of the Gunas. The present article differs in scope by extending beyond departure to examine the relationship among prophecy, emotional development, leadership, moral uncertainty, and the emerging identity of Mahadev. Campbell is therefore used as a framework for transformation rather than as a template into which every narrative event must be fitted.

The ethical and political dimensions of Tripathi's mythological reconstruction have received increased attention in more recent criticism. Deshmukh and Nerpagar (2026) examine discourses of power and resistance in *The Immortals of Meluha*, drawing attention to political authority, social exclusion, the position of Nagas and Vikarmas, and Shiva's developing sense of inclusive leadership. Their study is important because it demonstrates that the novel's conflicts cannot be reduced to physical warfare. Questions of who possesses authority, who is marginalised, and how social categories are constructed become part of Shiva's moral environment.

Kamaladevi and Sathyakala (2026) similarly examine caste, gender, and religious power in the novel. Their discussion of orthodoxy and social hierarchy highlights tensions within Meluha's apparently ideal civilisation. Such tensions are central to Shiva's development because his admiration for Meluhan order is gradually complicated by his encounters with practices that appear unjust. The treatment of Sati as a Vikarma is particularly important in this regard. Shiva's response to institutionalised discrimination demonstrates the movement from accepting an impressive civilisation to independently evaluating its moral assumptions.

Lukeshwaran and Rajendran (2026) examine narrative strategies and thematic innovation in the *Shiva Trilogy*, emphasising the transformation of Shiva from a human figure towards divinity through actions and decisions. Their discussion of moral ambiguity, governance, dharma, and social responsibility comes particularly close to the concerns of the present

article. Arivika and Latha (2026) likewise explore myth, modernity, and moral consciousness, observing that Tripathi's Shiva is shaped through choice, doubt, and responsibility rather than presented simply as an inaccessible divine figure. Together, these studies indicate an increasing critical interest in the ethical dimensions of Tripathi's reconstruction of mythology.

Narayan (2026) approaches Tripathi's works through the relationship between myth and popular culture. The study draws attention to the humanisation of divine figures, the rationalisation of supernatural elements, and the adaptation of mythology to contemporary social concerns. This perspective is valuable because *The Immortals of Meluha* depends upon a productive relationship between cultural memory and popular narrative. Readers encounter familiar names and symbols but are offered new fictional explanations for their significance.

The existing scholarship therefore establishes several important dimensions of Tripathi's fiction: the contemporisation of mythology, the humanisation of Shiva, the structural relevance of Campbell's monomyth, the reinterpretation of traditional symbols, and the novel's engagement with social and political questions. Yet these areas have often been examined separately. Studies applying Campbell tend to concentrate on the stages of the journey, while studies of humanisation emphasise Shiva's accessibility as a character. Research on power, hierarchy, and morality identifies the social issues within the novel but does not always connect them systematically with the development of heroic identity.

The present study brings these strands together by examining how Shiva's humanity becomes the foundation of his heroisation. It treats the movement from tribal chief to Neelkanth and towards Mahadev as a progressive construction involving personal choice, social recognition, emotional development, leadership, moral doubt, and expanding responsibility. Campbell provides the principal model for understanding the transformative journey, while Frye helps explain the emergence of a culturally

recognisable heroic figure and Barthes clarifies how familiar mythic signs acquire reconstructed meanings. The study thus moves beyond identifying either a humanised god or a Campbellian hero. It argues that Tripathi's distinctive achievement lies in narrating the process through which a human leader gradually acquires the ethical and symbolic significance necessary for mythic remembrance.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CAMPBELL, FRYE AND BARTHES

The transformation of Shiva in *The Immortals of Meluha* involves more than physical movement from one geographical location to another. It includes changes in identity, social position, moral awareness, and symbolic significance. No single theoretical perspective fully explains all these dimensions. The present study therefore employs Joseph Campbell's concept of the hero's journey as its principal framework, supported by Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism and Roland Barthes's understanding of myth. Together, these approaches provide three related perspectives: Campbell explains the process of heroic transformation, Frye helps identify the protagonist's developing heroic position, and Barthes clarifies how familiar cultural signs are reconstructed within a new narrative. The framework may consequently be expressed as a movement through **journey, archetype, and myth**.

3.1 Joseph Campbell and the Hero's Journey

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell (2008) identifies a recurring pattern in heroic narratives that he describes as the monomyth. The broad structure consists of departure, initiation, and return. A hero leaves a familiar condition, crosses into an unfamiliar world, encounters trials and transformative experiences, and eventually returns with altered knowledge or capacity. Campbell's model does not require every narrative to reproduce every stage in precisely the same form. Its value for the present study lies primarily in explaining how

movement away from a secure identity creates the conditions for transformation.

Shiva's life among the Gunas can be understood as the familiar world from which his larger journey begins. He already possesses courage and leadership, but these qualities operate within a relatively limited tribal environment. His primary responsibility is the protection of his own people. The decision to migrate to Meluha separates him from this established world and exposes him to unfamiliar social institutions, political conflicts, religious expectations, and moral assumptions. The geographical departure therefore initiates a psychological and ethical departure as well.

The Neelkanth prophecy complicates the conventional idea of the heroic call. Shiva does not consciously seek adventure or divine recognition. His throat turns blue after his arrival in Meluha, and other people interpret the event through a prophecy that is already meaningful within their culture. His heroic role is thus offered to him from outside before it becomes part of his own understanding. His uncertainty about the title resembles the hesitation often associated with the hero's response to an extraordinary call, although the novel should not be mechanically forced into Campbell's individual stages.

Initiation is more useful for understanding Shiva's subsequent experiences. His trials are not limited to warfare. Love, social discrimination, political expectation, leadership, loss, competing accounts of justice, and uncertainty about good and evil all challenge his earlier assumptions. Such experiences alter the meaning of his strength. The warrior who knows how to defeat an opponent must gradually become a leader capable of asking whether the opponent has been correctly identified. Transformation therefore takes place through changes in judgement as much as through successful action.

Campbell's model also requires an important qualification in this study. *The Immortals of Meluha* is the first volume of a trilogy, and

Shiva's complete transformation cannot be expected within its narrative boundaries. The analysis consequently concentrates on departure, initiation, trials, and emerging transformation rather than claiming that the complete monomyth, particularly the return, has already been fulfilled. Campbell provides a flexible structure for examining growth, not a rigid checklist against which the novel must be measured.

3.2 Northrop Frye and the Heroic Archetype

Campbell explains the movement of Shiva's journey, but movement alone does not fully account for the increasing significance attached to him. Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism provides a complementary perspective. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye (1957) examines recurring literary patterns, character types, images, and structures through which individual narratives become connected with broader literary conventions. From this perspective, the hero acquires significance not merely because of personal ability but because the narrative places the individual in a recognisable relationship with society, conflict, and collective expectation.

Shiva enters the novel with several qualities conventionally associated with heroic figures. He possesses physical courage, military skill, charisma, decisiveness, and a strong sense of responsibility towards his people. Yet Tripathi does not present these qualities as proof of completed greatness. They function instead as heroic potential. The scale and meaning of Shiva's actions must expand before the tribal chief can acquire broader symbolic importance.

This expansion occurs as the community that depends upon him grows. Among the Gunas, Shiva is an admired chief. In Meluha, he becomes the object of hope for people who have no personal knowledge of his earlier life. The Neelkanth identity enlarges the relationship between the individual and the community: Shiva is no longer significant merely because he leads effectively but because others interpret him as the answer to a collective crisis.

Frye's perspective is particularly useful in distinguishing exceptional ability from heroic stature. Tripathi's Shiva is already an exceptional warrior at the beginning, but his heroic identity develops as strength becomes connected with sacrifice, compassion, social responsibility, and moral judgement. The archetypal hero is therefore reconstructed in contemporary terms. Greatness depends not solely upon defeating enemies but upon the responsible exercise of power.

Tripathi also modifies the heroic archetype by preserving Shiva's imperfections. He can be impulsive, uncertain, emotionally vulnerable, and mistaken. Such characteristics do not undermine his heroic potential. Instead, they make development possible. The hero becomes meaningful because he is capable of learning from experiences that challenge his earlier assumptions.

3.3 Roland Barthes and the Reconstruction of Myth

While Campbell explains transformation and Frye illuminates heroic pattern, Roland Barthes provides a means of examining the cultural meanings attached to Shiva's identity. In *Mythologies*, Barthes (1972) treats myth as a system of signification through which existing signs acquire additional cultural meanings. Myth, from this perspective, is not restricted to ancient sacred narrative; it is also a process through which societies make particular meanings appear familiar, meaningful, and culturally powerful.

This approach is especially relevant because Tripathi writes for readers who may already recognise Shiva, Neelkanth, Sati, Nandi, Daksha, and Mahadev. These names and signs enter the novel carrying meanings formed outside the fictional narrative. Tripathi does not erase those associations. Instead, he relocates them within an alternative human history.

The blue throat demonstrates this process clearly. At the physical level, it is a bodily transformation. Within Meluhan culture, however, it becomes evidence of the Neelkanth prophecy. For readers familiar with Shiva

mythology, it carries an additional cultural association. The same sign therefore possesses different levels of meaning depending upon who interprets it.

The title Mahadev operates differently. Unlike the blue throat, it cannot be reduced to a single physical event. Its significance must gradually emerge from Shiva's actions. Tripathi effectively takes a culturally completed image—the divine Shiva known to readers—and imaginatively reconstructs the human experiences that could make such an identity meaningful. Myth becomes not simply the source of the narrative but also its anticipated destination.

Barthes's perspective is equally useful for examining social labels within Meluha. Categories such as Neelkanth and Vikarma demonstrate how societies attach meanings to individuals. Shiva is elevated through one culturally interpreted sign, while Sati is restricted through another socially established classification. The contrast encourages Shiva, and the reader, to recognise that socially accepted meanings are not necessarily identical with moral truth.

3.4 Integrating Journey, Archetype and Myth

The three theoretical perspectives are therefore complementary rather than interchangeable. Campbell addresses how Shiva changes; Frye explains how that changing individual develops into a recognisable heroic figure; Barthes illuminates how the resulting identity acquires mythic and cultural meaning. Together, they allow the study to move beyond the simple claim that Tripathi has humanised a god.

The framework instead makes it possible to trace a progressive construction. Shiva departs from a secure tribal identity and undergoes transformative experiences; his qualities acquire wider heroic significance as responsibility expands beyond the Gunas; and familiar cultural signs gradually receive new meanings through his actions. The resulting trajectory may be expressed as human leader → heroic journey → archetypal enlargement → mythic significance.

This integrated approach supports the central argument of the study: *The Immortals of Meluha* reverses the conventional relationship between divinity and humanity. Shiva is not presented as great merely because he is already divine. Within Tripathi's fictional world, his movement towards Mahadev becomes intelligible because human experiences progressively transform courage into leadership, leadership into moral responsibility, and social recognition into heroic significance. Campbell, Frye, and Barthes together provide the conceptual tools necessary to examine that transformation without reducing it either to a fixed heroic formula or to a simple retelling of inherited mythology.

4. SHIVA AS TRIBAL CHIEF AND CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

Tripathi's reconstruction of Shiva begins with a deliberate separation between cultural expectation and fictional reality. Readers may approach *The Immortals of Meluha* already knowing Shiva as Mahadev, but the protagonist introduced at Mount Kailash possesses no awareness of such an identity. He is the chief of the Gunas, a small Himalayan tribe whose existence is shaped by insecurity, conflict, and the practical demands of survival. This human beginning is fundamental to the novel because it establishes that Shiva possesses qualities of leadership before prophecy identifies him as extraordinary. His later heroic status therefore develops from an existing ethical foundation rather than appearing suddenly with the blue throat.

Shiva's authority among the Gunas is based largely on earned respect. Tripathi describes his leadership in terms of military intelligence and "sheer personal bravery" (Tripathi, 2010). His people trust him because he has repeatedly demonstrated his ability to protect them. Courage at this stage is practical rather than symbolic. Shiva fights because the survival of his community requires it, not because he imagines himself engaged in a universal struggle between good and evil. The distinction is important: his

earliest heroic qualities arise within ordinary human responsibility.

The tribal environment also reveals Shiva's dissatisfaction with violence. The continuing conflict with the Pakratīs has reduced life to "pointless battles with no end in sight" (Tripathi, 2010). This attitude complicates any attempt to define him merely as a warrior who seeks glory through combat. Although he is capable of violence, he does not value warfare for its own sake. His primary concern is the safety of the Gunas, especially when repeated attacks threaten the vulnerable members of the tribe. Warfare is consequently represented as a burden of leadership rather than a source of personal distinction.

This distinction becomes particularly important when the Meluhans offer the Gunas an opportunity to migrate. Shiva recognises that remaining at Mount Kailash may preserve familiar traditions but will also continue exposing his people to insecurity. Migration, by contrast, offers the possibility of safety while requiring them to abandon the world they know. His response reveals a form of leadership based on practical responsibility. He is prepared to accept uncertainty when remaining within the familiar has become dangerous.

Yet Tripathi does not portray Shiva as an authoritarian chief who assumes that leadership gives him ownership of collective decisions. When Bhadrā reminds him that the chief's decision traditionally represents the decision of the tribe, Shiva refuses to rely automatically upon that privilege. He tells his people that the choice must be theirs and declares, "This time, I follow you" (Tripathi, 2010). The moment is significant because it reverses the conventional direction of authority. The chief who has the right to command chooses instead to listen.

This willingness to limit his own power establishes an important feature of Shiva's emerging heroic identity. Leadership is not represented as the ability to make others obey but as the willingness to recognise their agency. His statement that "some traditions are meant to be

broken" (Tripathi, 2010) further reveals that tradition does not possess unquestionable authority for him. A custom remains valuable only when it continues to serve the people whose lives it governs.

The principle established among the Gunas later becomes essential in Meluha. Shiva enters a civilisation that is far more organised than his tribal community and whose traditions are supported by elaborate social and religious explanations. His earlier willingness to question tribal convention prepares him to examine Meluhan institutions rather than simply accept them because they are ancient or socially respected. The seeds of later moral resistance are therefore already visible before the Neelkanth appears.

The migration itself marks the first major transformation in Shiva's journey. Campbell's concept of departure is useful here because Shiva leaves not only a geographical location but also a social world in which his identity is secure. At Mount Kailash he knows who he is: chief, warrior, protector, and member of the Guna community. Meluha removes that certainty. He enters as an immigrant and outsider whose understanding of the new civilisation must be constructed through observation and experience.

The contrast between the two worlds initially appears striking. The Gunas have lived with scarcity, danger, and recurring conflict, whereas Meluha offers order, prosperity, planned settlements, medical knowledge, and institutional stability. Shiva understandably responds with admiration. The civilisation seems to embody the security he has wanted for his people, and his decision to migrate appears justified by the improvement in their circumstances.

Tripathi, however, does not allow this contrast to develop into a simple opposition between primitive tribe and perfect civilisation. Shiva's outsider status enables him to admire Meluha without being completely conditioned by its assumptions. As he encounters its institutions more closely, he begins to discover that social order can coexist with exclusion and that

established rules may produce suffering. The journey into Meluha therefore introduces him not merely to civilisation but to its contradictions.

His position also changes significantly. Among the Gunas, Shiva possesses authority because of shared history and demonstrated leadership. In Meluha, he initially possesses no equivalent social status. This temporary displacement is important because it separates identity from position. Shiva must enter a world in which the qualities that made him chief remain part of his character even when the institutional authority of chieftainship no longer defines him.

The unexpected transformation of his throat radically alters this situation. After the administration of Somras, the physical sign that the Meluhans associate with their ancient prophecy appears upon him. The outsider is suddenly interpreted as the civilisation's long-awaited saviour. The transition is extraordinary because Shiva moves almost immediately from relative anonymity to symbolic importance, yet his internal understanding does not change at the same speed.

This creates a distinction between the journey of the body and the journey of identity. Geographically, Shiva has crossed from Mount Kailash into Meluha. Socially, he has crossed from tribal chief to the figure identified as Neelkanth. Psychologically, however, he remains uncertain about the meaning of this new role. Tripathi deliberately allows these transformations to occur at different rates.

From Campbell's perspective, Meluha consequently functions as the unfamiliar world in which Shiva's existing qualities are subjected to larger tests. Crossing the threshold does not immediately create the hero; it removes the boundaries within which his earlier identity was sufficient. Courage that once protected a tribe must now operate within political conflict, social hierarchy, prophecy, and competing definitions of justice.

Frye's archetypal perspective similarly clarifies the enlargement taking place. Shiva begins as an exceptional individual within a small

community, but migration places him in circumstances where his actions can acquire significance for a much larger social body. His heroic potential is therefore not created by Meluha, although Meluha provides the setting in which that potential can expand.

Barthes's understanding of myth becomes particularly relevant at the point where the blue throat appears. For Shiva, the change is physical and unexpected; for the Meluhans, it is already culturally meaningful. His body becomes a sign interpreted through an existing narrative of salvation. The individual who arrived seeking security for his tribe is suddenly assigned a meaning produced by the collective memory of another civilisation.

This moment establishes the central tension that drives the remainder of Shiva's development. His earlier identity has been built through action, whereas his new identity is initially created through interpretation. He earned the trust of the Gunas through leadership, but the Meluhans revere him because his body corresponds to prophecy. The difference between these two forms of recognition raises a crucial question: can an identity conferred by belief become an identity justified through conduct?

The movement from Mount Kailash to Meluha therefore represents far more than a change of setting. It transfers Shiva from a world in which his responsibilities are familiar to one in which both his authority and moral obligations must be redefined. He carries with him the courage, independence, concern for collective welfare, and willingness to question tradition that characterised his tribal leadership. What changes is the scale upon which these qualities will be tested.

Tripathi thus establishes the human foundation of heroic transformation before introducing the full burden of prophecy. Shiva crosses the threshold not as a god entering the human world but as a human leader entering circumstances that will demand more from him than tribal leadership alone can provide. The

chief of the Gunas leaves Mount Kailash in search of safety for his people; the man who enters Meluha unknowingly crosses into a world that will require him to discover what it means to become a hero.

5. NEELKANTH, PROPHECY AND CONSTRUCTED IDENTITY

The appearance of Shiva's blue throat marks a decisive moment in *The Immortals of Meluha*, but its significance lies less in the physical transformation itself than in the meanings attached to it. Shiva does not arrive in Meluha claiming supernatural authority, nor does he seek recognition as a saviour. The Meluhans interpret his altered throat through an existing prophecy and identify him as the Neelkanth. His new identity is therefore initially constructed by society rather than chosen by the individual. This creates one of the novel's central tensions: the difference between being named a hero and becoming one through action.

Before the blue throat appears, Shiva's understanding of himself remains connected to his earlier life. He is a Guna, an experienced warrior, and a chief concerned primarily with the welfare of his tribe. The Meluhans, however, view the same individual through an entirely different cultural framework once the physical sign becomes visible. To them, the blue throat is not an accidental bodily change. It confirms a long-awaited expectation and turns the foreign tribal leader into the possible solution to a collective crisis.

The speed of this transformation in public perception contrasts sharply with Shiva's own uncertainty. Nothing in the appearance of the blue throat provides him with additional knowledge, moral certainty, or divine wisdom. His body changes, but his consciousness remains human. He therefore confronts an identity whose meaning is clearer to those around him than it is to himself. Tripathi uses this difference to prevent prophecy from functioning as an easy substitute for character development.

Barthes's conception of myth helps explain the process. A physical sign acquires

meaning through the cultural system in which it is interpreted. The blue throat means something extraordinary to the Meluhans because it already belongs to a narrative of expectation. Their response demonstrates how collective belief can transform an individual into a symbol. Shiva's body becomes the site upon which an entire civilisation projects hope, fear, and anticipated salvation.

The process also illustrates that identity can be partly produced through the gaze of others. Shiva may remain uncertain about being the Neelkanth, but he cannot prevent the title from affecting his position. People respond to him differently, political leaders attach importance to his presence, and ordinary citizens invest him with expectations that did not exist before. The prophecy therefore creates social consequences even before Shiva accepts its spiritual meaning.

This externally constructed identity presents both privilege and burden. The title grants Shiva unusual authority, but it also places him under an obligation he has never requested. The Meluhans do not merely celebrate the arrival of the Neelkanth; they expect him to confront the evil threatening their civilisation. Recognition consequently becomes inseparable from responsibility.

Shiva's hesitation is important in this context. His reluctance to accept extraordinary status should not be interpreted simply as weakness or disbelief. It reflects an awareness of the distance between what others believe him to be and what he knows about himself. He is conscious of his anger, uncertainty, limitations, and human history. Such self-knowledge makes unquestioning acceptance of a saviour identity difficult.

Campbell's concept of the heroic call offers a useful parallel, although Tripathi modifies the pattern. Shiva does not receive a conventional summons directing him towards a clearly defined adventure. Instead, the call emerges through interpretation: society tells him that his physical transformation means he has a

larger destiny. His uncertainty therefore resembles a form of resistance to an externally assigned heroic role. The crucial development occurs when responsibility begins to matter more than certainty.

The faith of ordinary Meluhans contributes significantly to this change. Their belief gives the prophecy a human dimension. Shiva may question whether he has truly been chosen by destiny, but he cannot easily ignore people who place genuine hope in him. Their dependence creates an ethical demand that does not require him first to resolve every metaphysical question surrounding his identity.

This distinction allows Tripathi to shift the emphasis from destiny to agency. Whether prophecy is objectively true becomes less important than how Shiva responds to the circumstances it creates. He cannot control the fact that his throat has turned blue or that the Meluhans interpret it as sacred evidence. He can, however, decide what he will do with the authority and trust that follow.

The novel therefore establishes a productive relationship between fate and free will. Fate appears to create the conditions of Shiva's transformation, while individual choice determines its moral direction. Prophecy may open the path towards heroic identity, but it cannot walk that path for him.

The political implications of the Neelkanth identity further complicate this process. Meluha is not merely a community awaiting spiritual reassurance; it is a civilisation involved in conflict. Once Shiva is recognised as the promised saviour, his symbolic authority becomes connected with Meluhan political interests. Those around him naturally interpret his role through their own understanding of enemies, threats, and justice.

This creates a potential danger. If Shiva accepts both the prophecy and the Meluhan interpretation of the world without question, he risks becoming an instrument through which one civilisation validates its own political position. The Neelkanth would then possess enormous

authority without independent moral judgement. Tripathi avoids this outcome by allowing Shiva's experiences gradually to complicate the explanations initially provided to him.

The problem becomes particularly significant because the prophecy appears to identify Shiva as the destroyer of evil without supplying a simple definition of evil itself. Meluhan society assumes that the answer is already known. Shiva's development eventually requires him to recognise that identifying evil is more difficult than possessing the power to fight it. The prophecy thus generates a moral question rather than providing a complete moral answer.

Frye's archetypal perspective helps explain the change in Shiva's social position. The hero increasingly becomes the figure through whom a community imagines deliverance from crisis. Shiva's significance therefore expands beyond his personal qualities. Yet Tripathi modifies this heroic pattern by repeatedly separating public expectation from private certainty. The hero is culturally created before he is psychologically prepared to occupy the role.

This separation is central to the novel's humanisation of Shiva. If the blue throat immediately transformed him into an infallible figure, subsequent choices would lose much of their ethical significance. Instead, Shiva remains capable of misunderstanding situations and acting under emotional pressure. The Neelkanth title does not remove his limitations; it makes the consequences of those limitations greater.

The contrast between Neelkanth and Vikarma further exposes the social construction of identity. Meluhan culture elevates Shiva because a physical sign is interpreted as evidence of exceptional destiny, while individuals classified as Vikarmas experience restrictions because their misfortunes are interpreted through another cultural belief. One label raises an individual above society; the other pushes individuals towards its margins. Shiva's later response to Sati's position makes him increasingly aware that socially established identities require moral examination rather than automatic acceptance.

Heroic identity therefore develops through a gradual negotiation between the name society gives Shiva and the meaning he gives that name through his conduct. Initially, Neelkanth is almost entirely external: it belongs to prophecy, collective memory, and Meluhan expectation. As Shiva accepts wider responsibilities, the title begins to acquire a personal ethical dimension.

This development distinguishes recognition from worthiness. Recognition can occur instantly because it depends upon the visible sign of the blue throat. Worthiness requires time because it depends upon choices made under difficult circumstances. The novel's larger transformation rests upon the distance between these two moments.

Barthes's theory becomes particularly productive here. The Neelkanth begins as a culturally recognised sign, but Tripathi gradually fills that sign with a newly imagined human history. The reader does not merely encounter the familiar mythological title; the reader witnesses a fictional process through which the title acquires ethical substance. Myth is thus reconstructed through character development.

The movement also prepares the distinction between Neelkanth and Mahadev. Within the narrative, Neelkanth can be conferred through prophecy because the physical evidence appears to satisfy an existing cultural expectation. Mahadev demands something more. It implies a stature that cannot be created solely by appearance, title, or public devotion. The journey towards it requires Shiva to develop compassion, leadership, moral independence, and a wider understanding of responsibility.

Tripathi therefore places agency at the centre of heroic construction. Shiva's circumstances may be extraordinary, but his significance ultimately depends upon his responses to them. He must decide whether power will serve personal status or collective welfare, whether tradition deserves obedience or criticism, and whether inherited definitions of good and evil can withstand experience.

The Neelkanth prophecy consequently does not complete Shiva's transformation; it initiates its most difficult stage. It gives him a public identity larger than the one he has earned and forces him gradually to grow into the responsibilities attached to it. The title creates expectation, but experience must create meaning. The Neelkanth is given to Shiva by prophecy and society; the movement towards Mahadev begins only when Shiva starts transforming that imposed identity into an ethical responsibility of his own.

6. LOVE, COMPASSION AND HEROIC LEADERSHIP

Shiva's movement towards heroic identity is shaped not only by warfare and prophecy but also by his relationships with other people. *The Immortals of Meluha* repeatedly places him in situations where strength alone is inadequate. His encounters with Sati, Nandi, Ayurvati, Daksha, and the wider Meluhan community gradually broaden his understanding of responsibility. Through these relationships, Tripathi develops a form of heroism in which emotional responsiveness and compassion become as important as physical courage.

Sati occupies the most important position in this process. Shiva's attraction towards her initially reveals an ordinary human dimension of his character. He is not presented as an emotionally detached saviour but as a man capable of affection, desire, disappointment, and vulnerability. His growing attachment to Sati, however, soon moves beyond personal attraction because her position as a Vikarma confronts him with a social system he finds difficult to accept.

Within Meluhan society, Vikarmas are treated as people whose previous actions are believed to have caused present misfortune. The classification carries restrictions that affect their social relationships and personal freedom. Sati has internalised these expectations and attempts to live according to the rules imposed upon her. Shiva encounters the system from an outsider's perspective and is therefore less willing to regard it as natural or morally unquestionable.

His response is important because it marks an expansion of the questioning tendency already visible in his tribal leadership. Among the Gunas, Shiva was prepared to challenge tradition when it conflicted with collective welfare. In Meluha, his relationship with Sati makes him confront a more deeply institutionalised form of social convention. He begins to recognise that a highly organised civilisation can preserve practices that cause individual suffering.

Love therefore becomes connected with ethical perception. Sati's experience gives a human face to an abstract social category. Shiva does not encounter "Vikarma" merely as a concept; he encounters a person whose dignity, discipline, courage, and emotional life cannot be adequately represented by the label society has assigned to her. Personal attachment thus becomes one of the means through which inherited social assumptions are exposed to moral scrutiny.

At the same time, Sati is not simply a passive figure whose function is to inspire Shiva's development. She possesses a strong sense of duty and an independent understanding of honour. Her willingness to accept the obligations attached to her social position sometimes places her in conflict with Shiva's desire to challenge those restrictions. Their relationship consequently requires Shiva to recognise that compassion cannot be reduced to rescuing another person according to his own wishes. Respect for Sati involves acknowledging her agency even when he disagrees with the choices she makes.

This introduces an important change in his understanding of power. As a warrior, Shiva is accustomed to confronting obstacles through decisive action. Human relationships demand a different form of strength: patience, restraint, listening, and the ability to respect another person's autonomy. His emotional development therefore complements his martial ability rather than standing apart from it.

Shiva's vulnerability in his relationship with Sati further humanises the emerging hero.

The Neelkanth may be regarded by the Meluhans as the answer to prophecy, but his personal life remains marked by uncertainty. He can fear rejection, experience emotional pain, and struggle with circumstances he cannot resolve through force. Tripathi thereby preserves the distance between public image and private self. The people may see a saviour; the reader continues to see the human being carrying the burden of that expectation.

Other relationships also contribute to this development. Nandi's loyalty and faith expose Shiva to the perspective of ordinary Meluhans who sincerely believe in the Neelkanth. Nandi does not merely provide information about Meluhan culture; he represents the human consequences of collective belief. Through him, Shiva becomes increasingly aware that the title attached to him matters because real people have invested their hopes in it. Responsibility becomes personal rather than abstract.

Ayurvati represents another form of authority. Her medical knowledge and rational competence complicate any simplistic contrast between Shiva's tribal background and Meluhan civilisation. Shiva's willingness to recognise expertise outside his own experience is significant to his development as a leader. Effective leadership requires neither complete self-sufficiency nor constant dominance. It also depends upon the ability to trust knowledge possessed by others.

Daksha, by contrast, introduces Shiva to the relationship between political authority and prophecy. As emperor, Daksha occupies an established position of power, yet Shiva's emergence as Neelkanth creates a different kind of authority based on religious expectation and public belief. Their interactions place Shiva within political circumstances larger than the tribal conflicts he previously understood. He must increasingly recognise that decisions made under the name of the Neelkanth can affect entire communities.

These relationships gradually alter the scale and quality of Shiva's leadership. Among the

Gunas, his responsibility was immediate: protect the tribe, defend the vulnerable, and ensure survival. In Meluha, leadership requires him to understand people whose customs, histories, and expectations differ from his own. The movement is therefore from protecting lives to understanding lives.

Frye's archetypal perspective is useful here because the hero rarely develops in isolation. Companions, loved ones, advisers, rulers, and communities help define the significance of the protagonist's actions. Tripathi similarly constructs Shiva through relationships. His heroic identity becomes visible not simply in what he can accomplish independently but in the quality of his engagement with those around him.

Campbell's framework also permits these encounters to be understood as part of initiation. The trials that transform a hero need not always be battles or supernatural tests. Shiva's emotional and social experiences challenge his assumptions about authority, tradition, duty, and responsibility. Love becomes transformative precisely because it forces him to consider forms of suffering that military strength cannot solve.

The relationship between Neelkanth and Vikarma is particularly significant from a Barthesian perspective. Both are identities produced through culturally established systems of meaning. Shiva is elevated because his blue throat is interpreted as a sign of divine promise; Sati is restricted because her misfortune is interpreted as evidence of past wrongdoing. The contrast reveals the unequal consequences of social labelling. It also contributes to Shiva's growing awareness that culturally accepted meanings must be examined rather than simply inherited.

Compassion consequently becomes a crucial stage in the construction of heroic consciousness. Shiva's early courage enables him to protect people from visible threats, but compassion teaches him to recognise suffering produced by institutions, customs, and social judgement. His responsibility begins to extend

beyond defeating enemies towards questioning the conditions under which people live.

This development also reshapes the meaning of strength. Heroic leadership requires decisiveness when action is necessary, but it equally requires the capacity to listen, reconsider, and acknowledge the dignity of others. Shiva's emotional attachments do not weaken the warrior; they prevent the warrior from becoming merely an instrument of violence.

Tripathi thus makes Shiva's humanity central to his movement towards greatness. Love exposes vulnerability, compassion enlarges responsibility, and relationships teach him that authority must remain accountable to human consequences. The emerging hero is distinguished not simply by the number of people he can defeat, but by the increasing number of lives whose dignity he learns to recognise. In this sense, compassion does not interrupt Shiva's heroic journey; it gives that journey its developing moral direction.

7. GOOD, EVIL AND SHIVA'S MORAL EVOLUTION

One of the most important stages in Shiva's transformation is his changing understanding of good and evil. When he first enters Meluha, moral distinctions appear relatively clear. The Suryavanshis regard their civilisation as disciplined, lawful, and righteous, while the Chandravanshis and their alleged Naga allies are presented as forces threatening that order. Shiva initially encounters these groups through the explanations provided by the Meluhans. As his experience expands, however, he discovers that moral reality cannot be contained within such convenient oppositions. His development from warrior to emerging Mahadev consequently depends upon learning to judge good and evil rather than merely accepting the definitions offered by others.

Meluha initially appears to provide strong evidence for the Suryavanshi belief in their own superiority. Its cities are orderly, its institutions function efficiently, and its citizens enjoy material security. For Shiva, who has come

from a tribal environment marked by repeated conflict, such organisation is understandably impressive. The Suryavanshi system appears to demonstrate the benefits of discipline and collective responsibility.

Yet Tripathi gradually complicates this admiration. Order does not necessarily guarantee justice, and social stability does not eliminate suffering. The treatment of Vikarnas provides one of the earliest indications that an advanced civilisation can preserve practices whose moral legitimacy is questionable. Shiva's discomfort with such customs introduces an important distinction between socially accepted order and ethical rightness.

The Nagas present a related problem. Within the dominant Meluhan account, they are associated with deformity, violence, and danger. Their physical difference is easily transformed into evidence of moral difference. Shiva initially encounters them through this inherited narrative, but the very certainty with which they are classified eventually becomes problematic. Tripathi uses the category to expose the danger of attaching moral value to appearance and collective identity. A person or community cannot be judged ethically simply because society has already supplied a threatening label.

The Suryavanshi–Chandravanshi conflict provides the most significant challenge to Shiva's early moral assumptions. The conflict is initially presented to him largely from the Suryavanshi perspective. The Chandravanshis appear to represent disorder and aggression, while Meluha appears to stand for stability and righteousness. Once Shiva becomes involved in the conflict, his military abilities naturally align with the civilisation that has welcomed his people and identified him as the Neelkanth.

This position places him in a dangerous relationship with certainty. Because the Meluhans believe him to be their prophesied saviour, his participation in their struggle can easily acquire sacred legitimacy. If he simply accepts their definition of the enemy, military action may appear morally justified before the causes and

perspectives of the conflict have been adequately examined.

The consequences of confrontation begin to unsettle this confidence. The Chandravanshis cannot be understood merely as an embodiment of evil, just as the Suryavanshis cannot automatically be equated with moral perfection. The discovery that competing communities can interpret the same prophecy and political circumstances differently forces Shiva to reconsider the assumptions under which he has acted. The world becomes ethically more complicated precisely when he has acquired greater power within it.

This is a crucial stage in his heroic development. A conventional warrior may be evaluated by the ability to defeat an opponent. Shiva's emerging role requires a more difficult capacity: determining whether the person identified as an opponent truly represents the evil he has been called to confront. The central question therefore shifts from "Can Shiva defeat the enemy?" to "Can Shiva understand who or what the real enemy is?"

The distinction transforms the meaning of courage. Physical courage has characterised Shiva from the beginning. Moral courage develops when he becomes willing to question the beliefs of those who admire him and, more importantly, to reconsider his own previous judgements. Such reconsideration carries personal cost because it threatens the certainty upon which decisive action often depends. Nevertheless, the capacity to revise judgement becomes essential once Shiva recognises that power exercised on incomplete knowledge can produce consequences that courage alone cannot repair.

Campbell's concept of initiation helps explain this inward development. Shiva's trials do not simply make him stronger; they alter his perception. The journey through conflict becomes a journey away from borrowed moral certainty. His experiences expose contradictions that require him to think independently rather

than continue acting within a ready-made account of righteousness.

Frye's archetypal perspective further illuminates this development. As Shiva's significance increases, his responsibility can no longer remain confined to the interests of one social order. A hero whose authority carries wider symbolic meaning must eventually see beyond the limitations of the community that first recognises him. Shiva's moral evolution therefore parallels the expansion of his social significance. The more people his decisions affect, the less adequate a narrow partisan understanding of justice becomes.

Barthes's approach to myth is equally relevant to the categories through which the conflict is understood. Terms such as Suryavanshi, Chandravanshi, Naga, and Vikarma do more than identify social groups; they accumulate cultural associations that shape perception before individual conduct is examined. Through repetition, these associations can appear natural. The narrative gradually exposes their constructed character by confronting Shiva with experiences that do not fit the meanings he has inherited.

This recognition leads to a broader understanding of evil. At first, evil seems to have an identifiable external form: hostile tribes, political enemies, or dangerous groups. Shiva's experiences increasingly suggest that wrongdoing may also exist within respected customs, prejudice, unjust institutions, political interests, and apparently noble intentions. Evil is therefore not always located in a visibly different enemy. It may emerge when human beings become so confident in their own righteousness that they cease to examine the consequences of their actions.

Such awareness is particularly important for the Neelkanth. A prophecy that identifies him as a destroyer of evil would be morally dangerous if accompanied by an unquestioning belief that evil is always easy to recognise. The greater Shiva's authority becomes, the greater his

obligation to distinguish between an inherited label and an ethically defensible judgement.

Tripathi thus connects heroic growth with intellectual humility. Shiva's willingness to acknowledge uncertainty does not diminish his leadership. On the contrary, doubt becomes productive when it prevents power from hardening into dogmatism. A leader who never questions himself may act quickly, but speed and certainty are not substitutes for justice.

This development also alters Shiva's relationship with victory. Military success may resolve an immediate confrontation, but it cannot prove that every assumption leading to the confrontation was correct. The distinction between victory and righteousness becomes one of the most important lessons of his journey. Winning a battle demonstrates power; understanding whether that battle should have been fought requires wisdom.

The moral evolution of Shiva therefore depends upon a gradual widening of perspective. His early responsibility towards the Gunas teaches him to protect his own community. Meluha introduces him to responsibility on the scale of a civilisation. The conflict with other communities forces him towards an even broader ethical position in which justice cannot be determined solely by loyalty to the group that first placed its faith in him.

The emerging Mahadev must consequently possess more than exceptional strength. He must develop the ability to examine the categories through which strength is directed. This is why Shiva's mistakes, uncertainties, and revisions of judgement remain important to Tripathi's reconstruction. An infallible protagonist would already possess the moral knowledge that the human Shiva must acquire through experience.

By destabilising the simple opposition between good and evil, Tripathi turns heroic development into an ethical process. Shiva begins by asking how he can defend those who depend upon him; he gradually learns to ask whether the assumptions behind defence, punishment, and

destruction are themselves just. His movement towards Mahadev therefore occurs not when he becomes absolutely certain of his righteousness, but when he becomes morally responsible enough to question certainty before exercising power in its name.

8. FROM NEELKANTH TOWARDS MAHADEV: REVERSING THE MYTH

The movement from Neelkanth towards Mahadev represents the most significant stage in Tripathi's construction of Shiva's heroic identity. Although the blue throat gives Shiva immediate symbolic importance, *The Immortals of Meluha* repeatedly demonstrates that recognition is not equivalent to transformation. Neelkanth is an identity conferred upon him through prophecy and collective interpretation; Mahadev, by contrast, represents a moral stature towards which he must gradually develop. The distinction enables Tripathi to reconstruct a familiar mythological figure through a process in which divinity becomes the possible outcome of human experience rather than its predetermined starting point.

The narrative begins with a cultural advantage that Shiva himself does not possess. Readers familiar with Indian mythology already know the name Shiva and its divine associations. They may recognise Neelkanth, Sati, Nandi, Daksha, and other names long before the fictional protagonist understands their eventual significance. Tripathi uses this difference between readerly knowledge and character knowledge to create a distinctive form of mythological reconstruction. The reader knows, in broad cultural terms, who Shiva will become; the narrative asks how such a figure might have come to deserve that remembrance.

This question transforms the function of myth in the novel. Instead of beginning with an already divine Shiva and making him psychologically accessible by giving him human characteristics, Tripathi begins with the human being and constructs a path towards mythic significance. The difference is subtle but fundamental. Humanisation usually moves from

the sacred towards the ordinary. *The Immortals of Meluha* moves in the opposite direction: from ordinary human limitations towards extraordinary ethical and symbolic stature.

Shiva's life as chief of the Gunas provides the foundation for this movement. Before prophecy enters his life, he has already demonstrated courage, loyalty, practical intelligence, and concern for collective welfare. These qualities are limited in scale but not insignificant in moral value. The future Mahadev is therefore not created from an empty personality by supernatural intervention. The characteristics that later acquire heroic importance are already present in the tribal leader.

What changes throughout the narrative is the range of people towards whom Shiva feels responsible. Initially, his moral world centres upon the Gunas. Their safety determines his decisions, including the choice to leave Mount Kailash. In Meluha, his responsibilities expand beyond tribal boundaries. The Neelkanth prophecy places the expectations of an entire civilisation upon him, while his relationships with individuals such as Sati and Nandi make those expectations emotionally immediate. Political conflict then pushes him beyond the interests of Meluha itself by forcing him to confront the perspectives of communities presented initially as enemies.

Heroic transformation can therefore be understood as a widening of Shiva's moral circle. His development does not require him to abandon loyalty to the Gunas; rather, the ethical principle underlying that loyalty expands. The instinct to protect his own people becomes an increasingly general concern with justice and human welfare. The tribal chief, the warrior, the Neelkanth, and the emerging Mahadev are not separate identities replacing one another. Each stage enlarges the responsibilities contained within the previous one.

The distinction between designation and development is especially important. Shiva becomes the Neelkanth because a visible physical sign corresponds with a prophecy. This

designation occurs suddenly. His movement towards Mahadev, however, cannot be produced by a single event. It requires accumulated choices. Courage must be tested by consequences; authority must be moderated by responsibility; loyalty must encounter competing claims; and certainty must be challenged by experience.

In this respect, prophecy performs an unusual function. It does not eliminate free will but creates the circumstances within which free will becomes more consequential. Shiva has not chosen the blue throat, nor has he created the Meluhan expectation surrounding it. What remains within his control is his response. Destiny may provide the possibility of greatness, but it cannot supply the moral content of greatness.

The novel therefore avoids presenting heroic identity as either completely predetermined or entirely self-created. Shiva's transformation occurs through an interaction between social recognition and personal agency. Other people identify him as exceptional before he is prepared to accept that position. Their faith gives him influence, but his choices determine what kind of influence he will exercise. Identity is constructed relationally: society gives him a name, while Shiva gradually gives that name ethical substance.

This process is evident in the changing meaning of power. At the beginning of the novel, Shiva's power is primarily physical and military. He can defend the Gunas and make rapid decisions under threat. Meluha gives him a different form of power—the authority that accompanies collective belief. The Neelkanth can influence people not merely because he is a skilled warrior but because others regard his words and actions as possessing extraordinary legitimacy.

Such authority is potentially dangerous. If Shiva were simply to accept the worldview of those who proclaim him saviour, prophecy could turn him into an instrument of existing political interests. His heroic development therefore depends upon acquiring sufficient independence

to question the very society that reveres him. The ability to resist the misuse of his symbolic status becomes as important as the possession of that status itself.

His response to social exclusion illustrates this independence. Meluha initially impresses him through its prosperity and discipline, yet the treatment of Vikarmas reveals that a civilisation can be highly organised while remaining morally imperfect. Shiva's attachment to Sati makes the issue personally meaningful, but its significance extends beyond romance. He begins to recognise the difference between obeying a socially established rule and determining whether that rule is just.

The Suryavanshi–Chandravanshi conflict extends this lesson into the political sphere. Shiva initially acts within a moral narrative largely supplied by Meluha. The resulting experiences expose the limitations of a binary division in which one civilisation embodies good and its opponent represents evil. Once these categories become unstable, the task of the Neelkanth changes. The heroic problem is no longer simply how to destroy evil but how to recognise it accurately.

This transformation is essential to the emerging meaning of Mahadev. Destruction without moral understanding would merely enlarge Shiva's capacity for violence. To become worthy of greater authority, he must learn to distinguish between power and justice. His growing willingness to reconsider earlier assumptions therefore represents development rather than indecision. The heroic figure becomes capable of judging the narratives that seek to direct his strength.

Campbell's model clarifies this movement as a process of initiation and transformation. Shiva crosses from a familiar tribal world into circumstances that repeatedly test the adequacy of his earlier understanding. The most important trials are not necessarily those that threaten his physical survival. Experiences that destabilise his assumptions about justice, loyalty, social order, and evil

transform him more fundamentally because they change how he understands the responsibilities attached to power.

Yet Campbell alone does not fully explain why this transformation acquires specifically heroic and mythic significance. Frye's archetypal perspective helps reveal the gradual enlargement of Shiva's position. The Guna chief begins as an exceptional person within a limited social environment. As the narrative progresses, his decisions become significant to increasingly larger communities. His identity develops towards the archetypal position of a hero whose actions address conflicts that exceed private interest.

Tripathi nevertheless adapts this heroic pattern to modern expectations. Shiva's greatness does not arise from perfection. He is capable of anger, emotional vulnerability, incorrect assumptions, and decisions that later trouble him. These qualities maintain his humanity throughout the process of heroisation. The novel suggests that heroic stature need not depend upon freedom from error; it may instead depend upon the willingness to learn from error and accept responsibility for its consequences.

This preservation of imperfection is crucial to Tripathi's reversal of myth. If Shiva displayed divine omniscience from the beginning, his decisions would confirm an identity already complete. Because he lacks such certainty, each difficult choice contributes to the construction of character. The possibility of being wrong gives moral significance to the effort to become wiser.

Barthes's understanding of myth provides another dimension to this process. Shiva enters the novel already carrying cultural meaning for the reader, but within the fictional world those meanings are reconstructed through events. The blue throat is perhaps the clearest example. A familiar mythological sign is given a material and narrative explanation, yet the explanation does not destroy its symbolic power. Instead, Tripathi demonstrates how a physical event might become culturally meaningful through collective interpretation.

The same process operates more broadly with the identity of Mahadev. For cultural memory, Mahadev is already a completed sign associated with divine greatness. Tripathi imaginatively moves behind that completed image and constructs a possible human history for it. The narrative can therefore be viewed as a kind of fictional archaeology of myth: it takes a culturally established figure and imagines the layers of action, belief, memory, and interpretation through which that figure might have acquired sacred significance.

This does not require the novel to reject or invalidate religious tradition. Tripathi's narrative operates as imaginative fiction rather than as a historical claim about the origin of Shiva worship. Its creative force lies in asking readers to view familiar mythology through the possibilities of human experience. Divinity becomes narratively accessible because the qualities associated with greatness are shown developing through recognisable moral struggles.

The progression may therefore be understood through four interconnected identities. The tribal chief protects a particular community; the warrior confronts immediate threats; the Neelkanth carries the expectations of a civilisation; the emerging Mahadev begins to judge responsibility beyond the boundaries of any single community. Each identity enlarges the previous one rather than cancelling it.

The movement also explains why Shiva's humanity must remain present even as his symbolic importance increases. Compassion, doubt, love, anger, guilt, and uncertainty are not temporary weaknesses that must disappear before divinity can emerge. They are the conditions through which moral understanding develops. The novel's imagined divinity is therefore grounded in humanity rather than opposed to it.

This point distinguishes the title Neelkanth from the emerging meaning of Mahadev. The first can be recognised through a sign; the second must become intelligible through a life. Neelkanth represents the moment when

society declares Shiva extraordinary. Mahadev represents the possibility that his conduct may eventually justify a much larger cultural memory.

The transformation remains incomplete at the conclusion of *The Immortals of Meluha*. Since the novel is the first part of a trilogy, Shiva has not yet completed Campbell's entire heroic cycle, nor has he fully acquired the moral knowledge associated with his later identity. This incompleteness is analytically important. The first novel records a process of becoming rather than a completed apotheosis.

Tripathi's reversal of myth can therefore be stated in terms of direction. Traditional cultural memory moves retrospectively from Shiva's established divinity towards stories that express it. *The Immortals of Meluha* moves narratively from human experience towards the possibility of divinity. The question is no longer simply how a god may resemble a human being, but how a human being might acquire qualities that later generations could interpret as divine.

The answer offered by the novel lies neither in prophecy alone nor in exceptional physical strength. Heroic identity develops through an expanding capacity for responsibility. Shiva learns that leadership is not simply command, that love can reveal social injustice, that civilisation is not identical with righteousness, that victory does not prove moral correctness, and that the power to destroy evil is meaningless without the wisdom to recognise it.

The movement from Neelkanth towards Mahadev thus represents the convergence of journey, archetype, and myth. Campbell explains the transformative experiences through which Shiva's earlier identity is tested; Frye illuminates the enlargement of the individual into a figure of collective heroic significance; and Barthes helps explain how culturally familiar signs acquire reconstructed meanings through narrative. Together, they reveal that Tripathi's Shiva becomes heroic not because the story merely announces his divinity but because the story makes his movement towards myth ethically intelligible.

In this sense, *The Immortals of Meluha* does more than modernise the image of Shiva. It reorganises the relationship between humanity, heroism, and divinity. Prophecy may identify the Neelkanth, but prophecy cannot by itself produce Mahadev. The blue throat makes Shiva recognisable as a figure of myth; his choices begin to make him worthy of becoming one.

9. CONCLUSION

Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* reconstructs Shiva by beginning at a point before divinity has become an established identity within the fictional world. The protagonist first appears as the chief of the Gunas, a capable but recognisably human leader whose immediate concern is the survival of his community. From this modest social position, the narrative gradually enlarges the scale of his experience and responsibility. His migration to Meluha, recognition as the Neelkanth, relationship with Sati, involvement in political conflict, and growing uncertainty about accepted definitions of good and evil collectively contribute to the construction of a heroic identity that remains incomplete at the end of the novel.

The analysis demonstrates that Shiva's transformation cannot be explained by prophecy alone. The blue throat gives him a new public identity, but it does not immediately alter his moral understanding. This distinction between recognition and transformation is central to Tripathi's narrative strategy. The Meluhans can identify Shiva as the Neelkanth in a single moment because their cultural tradition has already established the meaning of the sign. Becoming worthy of the responsibilities attached to that identity, however, requires experience, choice, and self-examination.

Shiva's earlier life among the Gunas provides the human foundation for this development. Courage, loyalty, practical intelligence, and concern for collective welfare are already visible before he enters Meluha. The journey does not create these qualities but places them within increasingly complex circumstances. His responsibility expands from the protection of

a tribe to the welfare of a civilisation and eventually towards a moral perspective that cannot be confined to the interests of one political community.

Relationships play an important role in this enlargement. Sati's position as a Vikarma exposes the limitations of accepting social tradition without ethical examination. Nandi's loyalty gives a personal dimension to the faith invested in the Neelkanth, while Shiva's encounters with political and institutional authority reveal that power carries consequences beyond individual intention. Love and compassion therefore do not function merely as emotional additions to the heroic journey. They teach Shiva to recognise forms of suffering that cannot be addressed through physical strength alone.

The Suryavanshi–Chandravanshi conflict further transforms his understanding of heroism. Shiva initially operates within definitions of good and evil largely supplied by the society that recognises him as its saviour. Experience gradually makes those definitions unstable. His development consequently involves the difficult movement from inherited certainty towards independent moral judgement. The ability to defeat an enemy becomes less important than the ability to determine whether the enemy has been correctly identified. In this respect, Tripathi relocates heroism from physical conquest to ethical responsibility.

Joseph Campbell's concept of the hero's journey provides the principal framework for understanding this transformation. Shiva's departure from Mount Kailash and his experiences in Meluha represent stages of separation, trial, and emerging change. Since *The Immortals of Meluha* is only the first novel of the trilogy, however, the study does not claim that Campbell's complete cycle, particularly the return, has been fulfilled. The value of the monomyth lies instead in explaining how movement beyond the familiar exposes Shiva to experiences capable of transforming his consciousness.

Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism complements this approach by clarifying the enlargement of Shiva from an exceptional tribal leader into a figure whose actions acquire collective heroic significance. Roland Barthes's conception of myth, meanwhile, illuminates the cultural construction of signs such as the blue throat, Neelkanth, Vikarma, and ultimately Mahadev. Taken together, the three perspectives reveal an interconnected movement of journey, archetype, and myth: Shiva undergoes transformative experiences, develops a wider heroic function, and gradually gives new narrative meaning to culturally familiar symbols.

The study therefore extends readings that concentrate primarily on the humanisation of Shiva or on the structural correspondence between the novel and Campbell's monomyth. Tripathi's distinctive achievement lies not simply in making a god resemble an ordinary human being, but in imagining how an ordinary human being may gradually acquire the moral and symbolic qualities through which he can be remembered as extraordinary. The movement is consequently not from divinity towards humanity but from humanity towards divinity.

This reversal also clarifies the distinction between Neelkanth and Mahadev. Neelkanth is initially a designation produced by prophecy and collective belief; Mahadev represents an emerging moral stature that cannot be conferred by a physical sign alone. Destiny creates the possibility of greatness, but agency determines its ethical meaning. Shiva's mistakes, doubts, attachments, and revisions of judgement are therefore essential rather than incidental to his development because they make transformation possible.

At the end of the first novel, Shiva has not completed this journey. What has changed most significantly is the range of responsibility through which he understands himself and his actions. The chief who once protected the Gunas is moving towards a position from which justice must be considered beyond tribal, social, and political boundaries. Tripathi thus presents heroic identity as an achievement continually shaped by choice rather than as an unquestioned privilege of

birth or prophecy. In *The Immortals of Meluha*, Shiva begins as a man whom history could have forgotten and moves towards Mahadev because

his choices gradually make him a man whom history could transform into myth.

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ETHICAL DECLARATIONS

Ethics Approval:

This study is based entirely on the critical analysis of published literary and theoretical texts and does not involve human participants, animals, personal data, interviews, surveys, or experiments. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

Consent to Participate:

Not applicable, as the study did not involve human participants.

Consent for Publication:

Not applicable, as the manuscript does not contain any identifiable personal information or participant data.

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The authors declare that the manuscript is an original work, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. All sources used in the study have been appropriately acknowledged and cited.