

Research Article

## Discourses of Power and Resistance in Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines *The Immortals of Meluha* by Amish Tripathi as a mythological retelling that interrogates the intersections of literature, politics, and power. It explores how political authority in the novel seeks stability through ideological control, presenting obedience as virtue and dissent as disorder while marginalizing alternative voices. Through myth-making, surveillance, and rigid social stratification, the Meluhan state sustains hegemonic dominance, revealing the mechanisms through which power legitimizes itself. The paper analyzes the text as a narrative space where authority and resistance are simultaneously constructed and contested, by humanizing Shiva as a leader shaped by ethical dilemmas and political responsibility rather than as an unquestioned deity, the novel challenges traditional notions of divinely sanctioned rule. Furthermore, marginalized communities, such as the Nagas and Vikarmas, serve as sites of resistance that expose the contradictions in Meluha's claim to moral superiority. Ultimately, the study positions the novel as a critical cultural text that reflects contemporary concerns about authoritarian governance and moral accountability, arguing that true legitimacy arises from ethical responsibility and inclusive leadership rather than rigid systems of control.

**Keywords:** Mythology; discourse; power; bio-power; resistance

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**Introduction**

Mythological narratives have long functioned as powerful cultural instruments through which societies negotiate authority, legitimacy, morality, and resistance. In contemporary Indian English literature, myth retellings have gained renewed prominence, not merely as cultural revivals but as politically charged reinterpretations of history, power, and governance. Set against the backdrop of an advanced yet rigidly regulated civilization, the novel presents Meluha as an idealized state that claims moral superiority through law, discipline, and divine sanction. However, beneath this utopian exterior lies a complex structure of surveillance, exclusion, and ideological domination. The text narrates Shiva's transformation from a Tibetan tribal leader to a prophesied divine power, assigned the role of political and military leader to save the Meluhan civilization. As he integrates into Meluhan society, he becomes aware of the contradictions rooted within its governance, society, and culture. The novel thus moves beyond mythic storytelling to explore institutional power, ideological conditioning, and the tensions between obedience and moral agency. In an era marked by global debates on nationalism, governance, and resistance, the novel remains particularly relevant for its implicit commentary on political power and ethical leadership.

**Literature Review**

The existing research reveals that the novel has been studied through an eco-critical, geopolitical, and postcolonial lens, focusing on conflicts arising from environmental imbalance, resource misuse, political rivalry, identity formation, marginalization, and subordination. Although existing scholarship on Tripathi's work largely focuses on its popularity, mythological reinterpretation, and cultural nationalism, it has paid limited critical attention to its political implications. Existing readings have overlooked the political aspects internalized through institutional narratives and resistance against hegemonic power structures. This gap necessitates a critical examination of the text as a political narrative that interrogates the legitimacy of power and the ethics of governance. This paper addresses that gap by situating *The Immortals of Meluha* within broader discussions of discourses like power and resistance in literature. The paper aims to analyse the novel as a narrative site where political authority is both constructed and contested. The study seeks to explore how power operates through myth, law, and ideology in the Meluhan state, and how resistance emerges through individual agency, ethical questioning, and marginalized voices. By doing so, the research aims to reposition the novel within broader discussions of political fiction and cultural power.

**Research Objectives**

This article examines how political authority is constructed and legitimized in the novel, exploring the mechanisms through which leadership is justified and sustained within the Meluhan empire. It examines how the novel employs myth and prophecy as instruments of ideological control, particularly in shaping public perception and consolidating power. The research further analyzes how resistance and dissent are represented within Meluha's socio-political structure, highlighting the

tensions between order and individual agency. Finally, the study considers how the narrative reflects contemporary concerns about governance, power, and moral responsibility.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in the understanding that literary narratives function as ideological spaces where authority, legitimacy, and resistance are constructed, negotiated, and contested. Drawing on Michel Foucault's conception of power, authority in the novel is not merely a sovereign force but a diffuse system operating through myths, institutions, rituals, discourses, and social norms. The Meluhan state's emphasis on order, discipline, and rational governance demonstrates how power functions through regulation and internalization rather than oppression, producing compliance while masking its exclusions. This framework studies how seemingly ideal political systems sustain authority through discourse, moral absolutism, and social norms. The Meluhan state can be examined through Foucault's concept of biopolitics, in which the state exercises control over bodies and populations through strict adherence to laws governing reproduction and health. Authority here is justified as benevolent and rational, yet the narrative gradually exposes its ethical costs and exclusions, particularly affecting marginalized groups such as the Nagas and Vikarnas.

The study adopts a qualitative, textual analysis approach grounded in literary and political theory. The primary analysis will focus on *The Immortals of Meluha*, supported by secondary sources, including critical essays and theoretical texts on myths, power, and resistance. Close reading techniques are employed to examine characterization and narrative structure, providing a critical interpretation of authority and resistance.

### **Political Power Structures and Mechanism**

Meluha is portrayed as a near-perfect civilization characterized by advanced technology, centralized administrative systems, and strict adherence to institutionalized, rigid laws. The empire is ruled by a king, supported by priests, ministers, and military leaders, where order and rules are more important than individual freedom and aspirations. It is projected as paradise, 'The Land of Pure Life' (Tripathi 10), which "offers you a lifestyle beyond your wildest dreams... Just live in peace, pay your taxes, and follow the laws of the land." (Tripathi 2) The state's power structure, centralized in Daksha, the Vasudevs, and the ministers, upholds rigid social and religious laws and systems, leaving little room for freedom, diversity, or dissent. In Foucault's perspective, though Meluha appears utopian, it is a highly sophisticated disciplinary society where power operates invisibly through systems rather than brute force. Foucault rightly observes that "Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society." (The History of Sexuality-Volume 1-An Introduction 93)

Through the discourses of myths, legends, and beliefs, the Meluhans hold that Lord Ram established the Meluhan way of life and created their systems and ideologies,

which they consider the perfect way of life for their citizens. They constantly propagate through the knowledge systems that everyone is supposed to follow, without questioning authority. While familiarising Shiva with the rules of society, Nandi emphasizes that “Laws cannot be broken, my Lord. Not even for you.” (Tripathi 26) Though Meluhans believe that he is ‘Nilkanth’, the savior and supreme leader, law in Meluha is portrayed as absolute and universal, leaving little room for contextual judgment or ethical debate. Power is not merely located in the king; it is diffused through institutions, making it long-lasting and normalized.

The political authority uses religious beliefs as a divine foundation to unite the population, justify state decisions, and institutionalize power through myth and prophecy, so that it appears divinely sanctioned rather than politically constructed. This is appropriately discussed by Michel Foucault, who argues that power is not just centralized in a ruler or state but is diffused through institutions, knowledge systems, norms, and surveillance. Power operates through discourse, discipline, and the regulation of bodies. The political authority in the novel is established and maintained through exactly these mechanisms.

Foucault argues that power operates not through physical coercion but through language and discourse, particularly organized bodies of knowledge. This means that the state's discourse, such as laws and regulations, can impose power and discipline on individuals, transforming them into subjects of power. Political authority is therefore maintained not by blatant force but by disciplinary normalization through the legend of Nilkanth, Somras as a divine drink, the Suryavanshi faith, and the concept of evil. With reference to Foucault's perspective, the Vikarma system is a perfect example of ‘docile bodies’ internalizing the categorization, marginalization, and exclusion, where subjects follow them without experiencing subordination. Foucault refers to the mechanisms of exercising power as the “technology of power.” (Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison 193) to impose social norms through knowledge that guides people's behavior. The power structure, through strict social codes of conduct, belief systems, and moral policing, regulates the citizens without visible oppression. As a result, to achieve perfection and save their great land, the Meluhans voluntarily regulate their behavior by internalizing discipline and surveillance, refraining from questioning authority.

The strongest foundation of Meluhan authority is Somras, the drink of immortality, which is being produced and controlled by the state for longevity, superior health, and demographic stability. The Somras is central to Meluhan civilization, causing environmental imbalance, infant deformities, and inequality. It is manufactured at secret industrial sites in large quantities for longevity and vitality, using large amounts of water, especially from the Saraswati River. Meluhans enjoy long, healthy lives and maintain strength and youth well into old age. The authority is reinforced by a state-controlled biological substance in which citizens are materially dependent on political power for their very lives. In both books, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1990) and *Society Must Be Defended* (2003), Michel Foucault explains the shift from sovereign power to modern forms of discipline and bio-power as a

transition from a “right of death” to a “power over life” (The History of Sexuality-Volume 1-An Introduction 136). He opines that “The right of sovereignty was to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die.” (Society Must Be Defended 241) Foucault calls this as a form of bio-power, authority over life itself, where the states control their populations, particularly through public health and regulatory practices.

One of the most striking examples of institutionalized injustice in Meluha is the Vikarma system, where individuals are socially marginalized due to alleged sins committed in past lives. It is believed that “Vikarma people have been punished in this birth for the sins of their previous birth. Hence, they have to live this life out with dignity and tolerate their present sufferings with grace. This is the only way they can wipe their karma clean of the sins of their previous births.” (Tripathi 95) The Vikarma women, under the garb of beliefs and norms, have to pray for forgiveness every month; they are not allowed to marry, and they are not supposed to touch unrelated persons. This belief allows the state to naturalize suffering and inequality, framing social exclusion as a moral consequence rather than systemic failure. The Nagas who are born with severe physical deformities are completely ostracized from society. This is done in the pursuit of ‘perfection,’ rejecting anyone who does not fit its standards. The state strengthens its political power by identifying enemies, such as the Chandravanshis, to justify its policies and maintain order. They reinforce their internal authority by categorizing the Nagas and the Vikarmas through social hierarchy and the politics of Exclusion. The state’s emphasis on discipline and uniformity reflects an authoritarian model that prioritizes stability over individual freedom. Meluha thus embodies what may be described as an authoritarian utopia- orderly and prosperous on the surface, yet sustained by exclusion and coercion. The power in Meluhan state operates through myths and legends, social and religious rules, beliefs, and systems rather than through force, so that the subjects internalize discipline and show strict adherence to the systems, scrupulously without questioning authority.

### **Forms of Resistance**

Foucault viewed resistance as a natural and integral part of power relations. He argues, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” (The History of Sexuality-Volume 1-An Introduction 90) He contends that resistance is not a uniform or singular action. It can take many forms and occur in various ways. This is because power itself is diffuse and operates on multiple levels. He says “Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations.” (The History of Sexuality-Volume 1-An Introduction 90) He asserts that resistance is not aimed at eliminating power. Instead, it tries to challenge, redefine, or transform existing power structures, creating the conditions for change in society and within individuals.

The protagonist of the novel, Shiva, can be seen as a product of power constructed as divine through prophecy and initially controlled by political elites. He, instead of unthinkingly following the prophecy and becoming a passive symbol of salvation, resists the notion that his fate is predetermined. He criticizes the Vikarma law on moral grounds and argues that if a law is unjust, it should be challenged or changed. Upon revealing Vikarma's plight, he questions the authority. In his disapproval of this 'unfair law', he states, "That sounds pretty ridiculous to me. A woman could have given birth to a stillborn child simply because she did not take proper care while she was pregnant. Alternatively, it could just be a disease. How can anyone say that she is being punished for the sins of a previous birth?" (Tripathi 96) Shiva refuses to accept the absolute notion based on the discourse of the state, labeling the Chandravanshis as evil for being ideologically different. Shiva resists becoming a conventional savior or hero. Instead, his resistance leads him toward self-awareness, moral autonomy, and genuine leadership-not as a deity, but as a human figure who earns his place by challenging unjust systems rather than simply fulfilling roles cast by others. He questions the morality of the war and the true nature of good and evil. On realizing that he was misled and the war resulted in the deaths of thousands, he proclaims that "These people are not evil. They are just different. Being different isn't evil." (Tripathi 394) By questioning the moral authority of the state, the Vikarma system, Somras production, and the absolute idea of good and evil, Shiva challenges the ideology, authority, and power structure of Meluha. Unlike traditional rebels, Shiva does not seek to overthrow the system through force. Instead, his resistance emerges through dialogue, compassion, and moral reasoning. Shiva embodies a model of leadership grounded in empathy and accountability, suggesting that ethical power can exist outside institutional frameworks.

Similarly, one of the major characters, Sati, who is represented as an ill-fated woman called 'Vikarma', denoting 'untouchable' based on the sins she committed in a previous life. She exemplifies the strongest resistance in the novel against this discourse intended to foster domination, subservience, and obedience. She does not let her tragic past define her identity by rejecting pity and social labeling to assert her independence. She refuses to see herself as inferior and lives with dignity despite discrimination. She portrays herself as a respected warrior without expecting sympathy and acceptance. The most direct resistance occurs when Vikarma laws are openly challenged by Sati, who marries Shiva. It becomes a symbolic rebellion, breaking a rigid social taboo. Sati's resistance is not loud rebellion but dignified defiance. She silently resists social discrimination and gender stereotypes through courage, self-respect, and moral strength.

The Vikarmas are forced to follow strict rules, yet they maintain their self-respect rather than resort to violence. The key characters, despite discrimination and exclusion, refuse to see themselves as inferior and refuse to accept sympathy from others. In response to social stratification, the Vikarma people exhibit quiet resistance, outwardly accepting their fate but internally struggling with pain and injustice and maintaining dignity despite humiliation. They choose to survive with self-respect in a system that justifies injustice against them by imposing moral obligations on them. They

are not depicted as passive victims but as people of strength who participate in wars to protect their homeland and take pride in being part of the Suryavanshi ideology.

The Nagas, unlike the Vikarmas, embody a form of resistance that is direct, violent, and overtly confrontational. Rather than internalizing oppression or responding through silent endurance, they engage in active rebellion through strategic attacks, assassination attempts, and warfare. Their actions challenge the carefully constructed image of Meluhan perfection, exposing the fragility and moral contradictions underlying the system. They oppose the Meluhan order precisely because they are its victims, individuals who have been rejected, marginalized, and dehumanized since birth. Their struggle represents a rebellion against a civilization that sustains its so-called purity and idealism at the cost of human suffering. Their violence is not arbitrary but emerges from deep-rooted anger and accumulated injustice, making it a reaction to systemic exclusion. Through the Nagas, the novel critiques the tendency to label certain groups as 'evil', instead suggesting that such identities are socially produced through structures of discrimination and neglect. Their organized and forceful resistance highlights the consequences of sustained social injustice and challenges the ideological foundations of Meluha's claims to perfection. Ultimately, their rebellion underscores how oppressive systems can generate the very violence they seek to suppress, revealing that what is perceived as evil is often the outcome of institutionalized inequality and rejection.

The Chandravanshis represent a political and ideological form of resistance against the dominant Meluhan empire. Unlike the Vikarmas, who resist silently, or the Nagas, who resort to violent rebellion, they embody a structured, collective opposition rooted in alternative beliefs and governance. They challenge Meluha's rigid belief in absolute order, perfection, and fixed law by propagating and practicing individual freedom, liberal thoughts, and flexibility over rigidity. They function as a unified community, preserving their culture and identity in opposition to Meluha.

In *The Immortals of Meluha*, resistance appears in multiple forms, like personal, social, political, and ideological. Through characters like Shiva and Sati, and marginalized groups like the Vikarmas and the Nagas, the novel shows that resistance is essential to challenging injustice and bringing about transformation. It teaches that no system is perfect, and questioning authority is necessary for true progress. The novels present mythological narratives suitable to contemporary times, thereby questioning the authority of established myths in society and transforming subjects' views. By representing and treating the mythological and divine characters as vulnerable human beings who are controlled, subordinated, and oppressed by the norms and beliefs of societal power structures, the author challenges the authority of divine forces. By humanizing divine figures, the author demystifies both religious and political authority by presenting the Gods as leaders shaped by choice, error, and consequences. This narrative strategy destabilizes the notion of unquestionable authority, encouraging readers to critically examine systems that demand obedience based on tradition or prophecy. The novel resists binary moral frameworks by illustrating how institutions claiming moral purity can perpetrate injustice. In doing so,

it aligns myth with political critique, transforming ancient narratives into reflections on contemporary concerns such as authoritarianism, social exclusion, and ethical governance. According to Foucault, power controls society through dominant narratives, and, in this regard, myth can create alternative narratives that challenge official truths and question authority. This acts as a counter-discourse that resists dominant power.

### **Conclusion**

*The Immortals of Meluha* emerges as a significant narrative site where political authority is constructed and legitimized through mythology, legal systems, and social stratification. The novel presents a critical view of the highly advanced yet authoritarian Meluhan society, which sustains its power through religious beliefs, codified laws, and diffused institutional practices. Through these mechanisms, power becomes internalized, leading to the categorization, marginalization, and exclusion of groups such as the Vikarmas and the Nagas. The text highlights how injustice is normalized and justified through disciplinary practices and dominant discourses. At the same time, the novel foregrounds resistance by offering alternative narratives that question the authority of myths and prophetic truths. By demystifying mythology and humanizing divine figures like Shiva, the narrative challenges the legitimacy of both religious and political authority. Through Shiva's ethical and moral dissent, the text exposes the systemic injustices embedded within the Meluhan state. Furthermore, the novel critiques the structures that determine individuals' fates through rigid laws and beliefs, revealing the moral limitations of such systems. It ultimately advocates for a model of leadership grounded in ethical responsibility rather than unquestioned adherence to tradition or authority. By reimagining mythology as political commentary, Amish Tripathi invites readers to engage with structures of power critically, recognize the human dimension behind institutional authority, and acknowledge the necessity of resistance within systems that claim absolute truth. The novel underscores that resistance is not always overt or rebellious; it often manifests through silence, endurance, and individual human dignity among oppressed groups.

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