

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

DEFORMED BODIES AND POSTHUMAN ALTERITY: A FOUCAULDIAN CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN *THE IMMORTALS OF MELUHA* BY AMISH TRIPATHI

R.VIJAYKARTHIC<sup>1</sup>, S.GARRET RAJA IMMANUEL<sup>\*2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>M.A IInd Year, Department of English, St.John's College, Palayamkottai

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor of English, Nazareth Margoschis College, Pillianmanai,

\*Email: [garretraja@gmail.com](mailto:garretraja@gmail.com).



R.VIJAY KARTHIC



S.GARRET RAJA IMMANUEL

ABSTRACT

The research paper is an attempt of the researchers to analyse Amish Tripathi's work, *The Immortals of Meluha*, with a Foucauldian framework of sociological criticism. In the paper we argue about the concept of segregating normal and abnormal, social construction of ideology, and the victimisation of people with deformity and disability. We see the novels as an attempt of the author to satirise the society for its victimisation of Dalit, deformed people and widows. Therefore, we discuss about the ideological construct and how power changes it as per its wish. The 'truth', here, turns to be the puppet of the power. When the power changes the truth also changes. For, an old power deformity is a curse and the new power celebrates deformity. Eventually, we argue that the deformed bodies are nothing but posthumanalterity and it is only because of the xenophobia, the people of Meluha despises the deformed. Altogether, the paper is a critical disability study with Foucauldian critical framework.

**Keywords:** Posthuman, Deformity, Foucault, Alterity, and Social Constructions.

Oppression and victimization have been major themes of literature for centuries. Every Literature has a society and every society has numerous groups. The powerful oppresses and exploits the powerless. The binary of powerless and powerful make the society a space of conflict. As Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels point out, "all history has been a history of class struggles, of struggles between exploited and exploiting, between dominated and dominating classes at various stages of social development" (7). Therefore, the conflict between the classes or different groups cannot be separated from any kind of society. The stronger group oppresses the weaker one and victimises them with their dominant ideologies. Ideology as Althusser negotiates, "has very little to do with consciousness" (233). Thus, it is evident that, as per Althusser's notion an unconscious idea controls the

society. Foucault calls the power which regulates the population of the society as Bio power. The social constructions, thus maintains society by separating the stronger and weak. This notion is even applicable to the society of Meluha.

Victimisation has many facets. The dominant group oppresses the subservient group, based on race, class, and sex. Tripathi has described a different kind of oppression based on the physical deformity. The society presented in *The Immortals of Meluha*(TIOM) is actually power centric and oppressive. The ideologies of the society victimises a set of people because of their alterity. Thus, the otherness can be seen as a result of the normalising power of the social construction. The social constructions are constructed by those who has Power. Andrew Heywood rightly explains that, "Falsehood is implicit in ideology because, Political

Ideologies An Introduction being the creation of the ruling class, its purpose is to disguise exploitation and oppression." (13). Thus the normalising power is described by various thinkers in various ways.

Michael Foucault, as a social critic, gives his own definition of the power which controls the society by setting norms. For Foucault, the society is governed by two kinds of power: repressive power and normalising power. The repressive power denotes, controlling the state using Police and Armed forces. The normalising power is unseen and undemanding. The subjects internalise the normalising power as norms and rules that they have to obey. According to Sara Mills, "Foucault's view of power is directly counter to the conventional Marxist or early feminist model of power which sees power simply as a form of oppression or repression, what Foucault terms the 'repressive hypothesis'." (36). As Sara Mill says, Power not only contributes to oppression but also to production. According to Gary Gutting, "Foucault claims that power has a positive epistemic role, not only constraining or eliminating knowledge but also producing it" (51). The society is given an ideology, which is the normalising power. The society accepts the normalising power as a new kind of knowledge and internalises it as the truth. Thus, social construction of truth is done by those who has power.

The state has a dominant group which creates rules and regulations. The power, according to Foucault, creates Knowledge (Gutting 16). The knowledge, created by the power is perceived by the subjects as truth. Thus, the truth is constructed by the dominant group, to be followed by the subjects. Most of the time, the 'truth' of the society favours the powerful ruling class and regulates the subjects. Foucault calls the 'truth' as knowledge. According to Foucault, the knowledge is created by power. Therefore, a complicated network of power relation is revealed. In Foucauldian analysis of the society and its social constructions there networks are analysed. Thus, it is obvious is social construction is a result of power relation and circulation and production of knowledge. Through

the knowledge, the normalising laws are constructed.

One of the important aspects of social construction is representation and perception of deformity and disability in society. Disability studies focuses on the deformed bodies and their role in society. Foucault as a historian has also researched the history of western medicine and madness in his works. According to Foucault separation of 'normal' from 'abnormal' is medical based separation. The normal body is considered ideal and the abnormal body is seen as curse and therefore, the deformed people are considered as other. For Foucault, the medicine separated the sick and healthy. Mad people were separated from sane and confined in a space called asylum. The patient is confined into hospital. Thus the separation of 'normal' and 'abnormal' dates back to the establishment of clinic.

Lennard J. Davis expresses his views on 'normalcy' thus: "Disability was once regarded very differently from the way it is now. As we will see, the social process of disabling arrived with industrialization and with the set of practices and discourses that are linked to late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of nationality, race, gender, criminality, sexual orientation, and so on. (3). Davis in his book, *Enforcing Normalcy*, expressing the normalising power thus: "To understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body. So much of writing about disability has focused on the disabled person as the object of study. I would like to focus not so much on the construction of disability as on the construction of normalcy." (36).

Thus, the deformed or disabled have become victims of otherness. The disabled as seen as inferior and other by those who are normal. Therefore, it results in discriminating the deformed people by the branding of 'other'. Thus we argue that 'us' vs. 'them' mentality in the society is result of the social contractions and ideologies. As Davis expresses, "A common assumption would be that some concept of the norm must have always existed." (37). This notion of social construction and its oppression of disabled and deformed bodies is examined by the researchers with reference to Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha*. The society of

Meluha is seen as a dystopian space which is satirized by the author comparing with modern society. Tripathi, as a deconstructing agent of myth gives a new dimension to victimhood. Tripathi's description of Vikarma and Nagas are actually symbols of victimization based on disability such as deformed bodies and medical deficiency. We perceive the work as a satire on the contemporary society rather than a reworking of Indian myths. Tripathi, as an Indian writer, actually criticizes the society and its superstitions of curse through the character Shiva. We see Shiva as a deconstructing weapon of Tripathi to dismantle the superstitious social constructions of contemporary society and the novel serves as a master piece of Critical Disability Studies.

We affirm that Tripathi actually endeavours to give an account of contemporary society in the guise of Meluha. The ups and downs of Meluha can be analogized with the contemporary society where people are segregated based on physical features such as colour, sex and shape. We perceive the novel as a satire on the contemporary institutions and social constructions. The novel, on the surface level deals with myth. But actually it embodies issue of castes and the social and cultural elements which conceived the notion of such segregation. We call the notion, 'Ideology'. In Foucault's words, ideology can be named as 'knowledge' or 'episteme'. We attempt to analyse the society of Meluha with the lens of Foucauldian criticism. The framework of Foucault provides various standpoints, such as power, knowledge, and truth to analyse the society which is represented by the author. The first parameter, that we would like to use to understand the society of Meluha is, 'power/knowledge'. Foucault in his book *Abnormality* expresses:

Deformity, disability, and deficiency (the deformed, disabled, and defective are called the portentum or the ostentum), and then the monster in the strict sense what is the monster in a both juridical and scientific tradition? From the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, the period that concerns us, the monster is essentially a mixture. It is the mixture of two realms, the animal and the human: the man with the head of an ox, the man with a bird's feet-

monsters. It is the blending, the mixture of two species: the pig with a sheep's head is a monster. It is the mixture of two individuals: the person who has two heads and one body or two bodies and one head is a monster. (65).

Based on Foucault's notion we can conclude as the people with deformity are considered as monsters and abnormal. In TIOM, when Shiva asks who are Nagas, Nandi retorts: "They are born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous births. Deformities like extra hands or horribly misshapen faces. But they have tremendous strength and skills. The Naga name alone strikes terror in any citizen's heart. They are not even allowed to live in the SaptSindhu." (Tripathi44). Thus it is evident that they are considered as monsters just because of their physical deformities. We argue that Nagas are the true victims of the novel and Tripathi attempts to convey the social practices of current society in his novel. Because of the deformed structure the Nagas are shown as evil by Nandhi. The discrimination is not the result of the Nandhi's branding but the problem is with the deeply rooted ideology of the society and the social constructions.

Another embodiment of the victimization is, Nagas are segregated and insisted to live outside the Meluha which is an obvious marginalization. Forcing them to live in a separate space, because of their bodily deformity is injustice. Foucault in his book *Abnormal*, talks about the exclusion of lepers from the city to the exterior thus: "I think we still describe the way in which power is exercised over the mad, the ill, criminals, deviants, children, and the poor in these terms . . . power exercised over these categories as mechanisms and effects of exclusion, disqualification, exile, rejection, deprivation, refusal, and incomprehension." (21). Meluha also has such system of exclusion. Nagas are excluded from Meluha because of their deformity. When Shiva asks about Nagas, Nandhi says, "The city of the Nagas exists to the south of the Narmada, beyond the border of our lands." (Tripathi 45).

Moreover, physically deformed are suppressed and defined as demons by the normal people. Tripathi clearly depicts the thought and superstitious perception of the society. Tripathi's

satire falls on the people who see deformity as ill-omen and evil. Nandhi who represents normal says, "They are cursed people born with horrific deformities and diseases in this birth as a punishment for terrible crimes that they have committed in their previous birth. The Nagas are embarrassed to even show their face to anyone . . . those deformed demons." (Tripathi 101). The concept of Karma and Curse of pre-birth is severely attacked by Tripathi in TIOM. Tripathi's another important commentary over the social construction is, the *episteme* of Meluha. The concept of Vikarma and treating people as marginalised because of their curse is ridiculed by Amish. The concept of Vikarma is described by Amish Tripathi thus: "Vikarma people, my Lord,' said Nandi sighing deeply, 'are people who have been punished in this birth for the sins of their previous birth. Hence they have to live this life out with dignity and tolerate their present sufferings with grace. This is the only way they can wipe their karma clean of the sins of their previous births.'" (Tripathi61).

The ideology of considering a being is inferior than another just based on the curse can be analogised with present day caste system. The Vikarmas are seen as inferior to other human beings and thus they are treated less than normal. We see the society of Meluha as a dystopian society which consists of caste system. Like Nagas, the Vikarmas are also victimised and marginalised. They are not even allowed to participate in celebrations and public gatherings. One such is Sati. Through the concept of Vikarma, Tripathi attacks the superstitions and caste discrimination of the society in general.

The third premise is Foucault's notion of 'power/knowledge' construction. Every society has a set of rules and ideologies that are constructed by the power for their benefits. The power can change, amend, and destroy the rule when they desire. This notion is explained by Foucault in his various essays. As Gary Gutting says, "Moreover, Foucault claims that power has a positive epistemic role, not only constraining or eliminating knowledge but also producing it." (68). Foucault also talks about *episteme* which is the knowledge of a particular period which may change. As Sara Mills points out,

"Foucault asserts that the set of procedures which produce knowledge and keep knowledge in circulation can be termed an '*épistémé*'. In each historical period this set of rules and conceptual tools for thinking about what counts as factual changes." (72). Here, the notion of knowledge is different. Knowledge or Truth is changed according to the Power.

The power determines which is truth and which is not. Tripathi also has this notion and satirise the society of Meluha with Shiva. Shiva is here portrayed as a destroyer of discrimination and prevailing ideological epitome of the society. As Habib points out, "Marx's notion of ideology is the ruling class represents its own interests as the interest of the people as a whole." (513). Here, the old ideology is replaced by the new power. Therefore, it is evident that when power changes the knowledge (ideology) and as a result *episteme* also changes. In TIOM, Ram is the former power and Shiva is later power. They have conflicting ideologies. Ram's ideology is perceived as thesis by the researchers and Shiva's ideology to change the old rule is perceived as antithesis. Therefore, the two contesting ideologies result in a new ideology which actually serves as a third space. McTaggart in his book *Studies in the Hegelian Dialectic* explains synthesis thus: "This third category, however, when it in its turn is viewed as a single unity, similarly discloses that its predication involves that of its contrary, and the Thesis and Antithesis thus opposed have again to be resolved in a Synthesis." (9). The new ideology is the synthesis of Ram and Shiva's ideologies. Terry Eagleton elaborate Ideology thus: "The function of ideology, also, is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society; in the last analysis, the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class." (5).

We argue that the notion of ideology in the society of Meluha is transient. The first power, Ram creates an ideology which degrades deformity; but the second power, Shiva celebrates deformity, therefore the society also accepts deformed people as a part of it. Thus, it can be analogised with Foucault's 'Power/Knowledge' concept. When Shiva is told to Shudhikaran, he responds, "the concept of doing a shudhikaran is completely absurd,"

whispered Shiva. In fact, the entire concept of the vikarma is ridiculous. I think that is one of the few things in Meluha that is not fair and should be changed.”(90). Thus, Shiva’s contestation is identified. Moreover, Shiva contested the old ideology the society is ready to accept his new ideology because of his power. Thus, it is evident that the society of Meluha is fragile before new powers and thus power can easily change the rules and regulations. Through this, Tripathi attacks the contemporary society and their responses to different powers. In TIOM, Nandi explains the past power and ideology as follows:

‘Lord Ram was the emperor who established our way of life, my Lord,’ replied Nandi. ‘He lived around one thousand two hundred years ago. He created our systems, our rules, our ideologies, everything. His reign is known simply as ‘Ram Rajya’ or ‘the rule of Ram. The term ‘Ram Rajya’ is considered to be the gold standard of how an empire must be administered, to create a perfect life for all its citizens. Meluha is still run according to his principles. (31).

Here, in TIOM, the normalising power is seen as one which provides “perfect life for all its citizens” (31). This attitude is called as false consciousness by younger Marxists (Wolfreys 40). Another instance of ideological change is seen where Nandi accepts that, “You can change it. You are the Neelkanth.” (122). Here, Shiva’s notions are accepted as truth since he has the power/position. He changes the two thousand years old ideology with his power. Therefore, we argue that the novel is actually not only a myth based but also a satire on society. The satire can be well analysed with Foucauldian critical lens.

We also argue that the deformity is merely a posthumanalterity and because of the xenophobia, the fear of the other, the deformed people were criticised and despised by the people of Meluha. The half human and half animal form is actually a posthuman condition where mutilated bodies are normal. The society which is afraid of such changes resists the posthuman nature. Because of the fear of otherness the impaired and deformed beings are treated as monsters. Promod K. Nayar, in

his book Posthumanism elaborates this condition as, “Monsters, these studies show, are expressions of cultural anxieties about – and demonization of – forms of life as diverse as the black races, particular animals, mutant babies/animals, the impaired and the insane. Strange animals, different physiognomies or skin colour and different bodies were categorized as monsters because they seemed to be outside any category.” (114). Here, Amish Tripathi talks about posthuman future and a dystopian society. To understand Amish, the novel should be analysed with a posthumanist lens where the alterity is common. Therefore, we infer that the novel is actually a satire on contemporary society by the author against its treatment towards deformed bodies, class system and ideological construction. In the light of Foucauldian terminologies it is obviously identified.

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