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REIMAGINING GENDER: MYTH AND FEMINISM IN THE SHIVA TRILOGY

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ABSTRACT
The academic discourse has long grappled with issues of identity and gender roles, universally recognized as a source of tension and conflict across cultures. Scholars and authors have significantly enriched this legacy through both authentic and fictional narratives. These texts frequently illuminate previously unaddressed voices, thereby underscoring the constraining nature of prescriptive gender roles. Emerging authors are actively 'reformulating and rethinking female characters', imbuing them with a new dimension of status and moral experience that often critiques traditional literary portrayals. This research aims to analyze 'Amish Tripathi's 'treatment of women characters' in his legendary work 'Shiva Trilogy'. Tripathi's female characters' challenge conventional portrayals, effectively highlighting the 'diverse and often overlooked identities of Indian women'. This paper will offer a concise and authentic exploration of the 'status of women in India during the Vedic period', specifically referencing these female characters in across various facets of social order, including 'education, philosophy, religion, administration, and warfare'. The present paper also examines the select texts from the standpoint of the concept of identity and gender on the basis of the theoretical framework of gender theories, specifically that of Judith Butler and Geetha V focusing on socially prescribed gender roles.

Keywords:
Feminism, Gender issues, Gender roles, Gender theories, Identity.

INTRODUCTION

Gender issues are the oldest and most established divisions between human beings, prevalent in every society, irrespective of its social, political, and economic foundations. Women's position in society has undergone a dramatic change and as literature represents society, the literary texts often mirror this emancipation of women. (Gupta, R. and Agarwal, A., 2022). Different theories related to gender indicate that gender differences aren't inherent but are instead shaped by society. According to Mikkola (2017), social interventions, where people are told not to act a certain way because it doesn't align with their gender, are the cause of these differences. He echoes this by saying that the behavioural traits associated with men and women are culturally learned. Millett (1971), states that gender has a "cultural character," which is shaped by shared societal expectations. Kimmel (2000) adds that gender roles are not fixed and depend heavily on context. He notes that definitions of masculinity and femininity vary across cultures, over time, and among different racial, sexual, and educational groups. In her book "Gender," Geetha (2002) examines how gender is intertwined with other social categories like caste, class, religion, and sexual preferences, creating complex and layered systems of power and inequality. She also analyses how gender is reproduced and maintained through various social institutions, including family, media, and education. Geetha's work aims to deconstruct the notion that gender roles are inherently natural or biological, highlighting the social and cultural forces that shape gender identities. Judith Butler (1990) in her influential book Gender Trouble, centres on the concept of gender performativity and argues that gender is not a fixed, innate identity or a natural consequence of biological sex. Instead, gender is a social construct that is produced and reproduced through a stylized and repetitive series of acts.

Traditionally, in Indian literary works, portrayals of women's status have largely reflected a male-centric perspective. Where, Indian tradition seemingly revering women by imbuing them with mythical and divine attributes, a common thread among these mythicized figures is their paradoxical seclusion and societal confinement. Traditionally, Society's chosen method of limiting women is to mythicize them into exalted, supernatural beings, thereby setting them apart from others. However, Tripathi's narrative disrupts conventional

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gender roles and encourages readers to critically examine long-held beliefs about divinity and the roles of women in spiritual texts. By presenting these formidable female characters as multifaceted individuals with unique aspirations and flaws, he creates a more inclusive and nuanced representation of Hindu mythology. This reimagining of ancient tales connects with contemporary readers, bridging the gap between traditional narratives and modern values. Ultimately, the trilogy prompts a critical examination of gender dynamics within both religious and secular contexts.

Feminist Reinterpretation by Tripathi

Tripathi deserves significant credit for breaking the portrayals of women's status which had largely reflected a male-centric perspective, in his fictional works. He not only builds societies where women wield equal power, but also actively redefines the societal norms that contribute to the subjugation of women. Tripathi crafts crucial works that juxtaposes contradictory cultural beliefs: those that promote gender bias against those that champion gender equality. His feminist reinterpretation of Hindu mythology, provides a way to understand how gender norms can be subverted, because gender is not a stable essence but a series of repeated acts, it is possible to perform gender in different ways that challenge the dominant other gender. It agrees with the Butler's theory of gender, which argues that gender is not a fixed, innate identity or a natural consequence of biological sex. Tripathi's retelling of the Lord Ram myths gives significant space to his female characters, portraying them as beautiful, virtuous, brave, and strong. These women support women's rights and shine despite adversity, having broken free from societal constraints. (Gupta, R. and Agarwal, A., 2022).

Geetha's (2002) framework—which emphasizes how gender intersects with other social categories (caste, class, religion, sexual preferences) to create power structures, and how gender is socially constructed and maintained by institutions—offers a rich lens for interpreting the female characters in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy. The female characters in Tripathi's novels are self-confident, with a body language that shows they've earned their place rather than being given a favour. Tripathi suggests that women's capabilities are never in doubt, and therefore, they don't need to adopt masculine behaviours or replace men on the battlefield to prove their worth. In his stories, being a woman doesn't make them vulnerable to manipulation. The author's works don't advocate for women to change, but rather for a change in the general attitude of men. Manisha Dwivedi's article, "Reflection of Vedic Age in women character of Amish Tripathi's the Immortals of Meluha," (2017), highlights that Vedic women enjoyed a degree of equality with men, including opportunities in education, law, social and religious life, and political administration. Dwivedi (2017) reflects that Tripathi's novels portray women with independence and self-reliance, possessing intellectual and spiritual depth, and even participating in martial pursuits.

Challenging Traditional Gender Roles in the Shiva Trilogy

Tripathi has deconstructed the socio-economic image of the contemporary powerful men with the courageous women, who contribute to the society through their inherent leadership attributes. In the Shiva Trilogy, Tripathi presents a compelling array of major female characters, including Sati, Ayurvati, Krittika, Kanakhala, Kali, Veerni, and Anandhmayi. Each of these women is depicted as skillful, independent, professional, and powerful.

Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy, through its female characters, reinterprets and celebrates feminine ideals within the context of Indian mythology and modern literature. It reflects the Vedic ideals, which saw women as equals to men. His female characters embody the Vedic ideals, showcasing their independence, self-reliance, and intellectual capacity. Specifically, the Shiva Trilogy portrays women with intellectual and spiritual depth, challenging the traditional patriarchal view of women. His works offer a fresh perspective on Indian mythology by highlighting the strength and capabilities of women, thus contributing to a reinterpretation and celebration of feminine ideals. The following character analysis demonstrates that the feminist actions and re-interpretations found throughout the trilogy are ideological in nature, asserting that true righteousness requires a departure from traditional, oppressive feminine narrative structures.

Ayurvati

In the Shiva Trilogy, Tripathi portrays 'Ayurvati', the head state doctor, as a character who challenges traditional gender norms. The first lady Shiva meets on Meluhan's land is Ayurvati.

"Welcome to Meluha. I am Ayurvati, your designated doctor. My nurses and I will be at your assistance for the time that you are in these quarters." (IOM)

Ayurvati's respected position and professional competence poses a challenge against the patriarchal attitudes that often restrict women in contemporary Indian society. By her efficient and marvelous treatment, Ayurvati saves Shiva and Sati in different situations. Those were the days, when woman was as free as men to learn skills and

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work. She effectively explains the scientific principle behind Meluhan longevity – *'We rust from the inside and hence age and eventually die. The air that gives us life also gives us death. The Somras reduces the oxidants in the body. It delays the inner rusting and hence, delays death.'*

Her appearance with a 'choti' and 'Janau' strongly depicts her intellectual capacity, as these symbols are traditionally related with highly respected Brahmin males. By assigning these symbols to a female character, Tripathi not only disregards accepted conventions but also constructs a society free from gender-based prejudice. The text highlights how societal biases are perpetuated by the traditional assignment of specific traits—submissive qualities like compassion to women and dominant qualities like aggression to men. In this context, one could refer to Simone de Beauvoir's concept that 'One is not born but becomes a Woman', to underscore that these gender roles are not inherent but are socially constructed, Tripathi depicted Ayurvati with authority and high-handedness. When she first encounters Shiva and he refuses her medical order, in an excellent portrayal, her high-handedness and subsequent frustration or anger is flawlessly rendered:

Ayurvati, showing authority, establishes her expectation of instant obedience from a newly arrived tribal chief. *'Your people are being attended to, immigrant. You will immediately take the medicinal bath as ordered. Do not waste my time.'*

Similarly, her reaction to Shiva's defiance summarizes the aggressive, non-verbal confrontation between the two strong-willed characters in their first interaction, *'Ayurvati too glared back at Shiva, who was used to being obeyed.'* (IOM) This deliberate blurring of gender attributes is presented as a crucial element for achieving gender equality. Ayurvati's characterization in the Shiva Trilogy, demonstrates Butler's theory by showing that gendered status is a social construct, not an essential truth; She is defined by her "performance" as a talented scientist and intellectual-woman and her professional competence, attributes traditionally assigned to male members. Despite her high professional position and the power which is linked to her professional class/expertise within the Meluhan administrative and intellectual institution, her authority is often tested or challenged by the *practical* reality of patriarchal resistance, as identified by Geetha's intersectional theory. Their individual power and struggles are not simply about *being female*, but are profoundly shaped by how their gender intersects with social stigma.

Kankhala

Kankhala is a compelling female character who exemplifies feminist principles through her professional competence, integrity, and ultimate defiance of a corrupt patriarchal system. As the Prime Minister of Meluha, Kankhala's role is highly important and professionally competent and highly authoritative. She is portrayed as a highly skilled and educated administrator, holding one of the most powerful political positions in Meluha.

Smiling politely, Daksha asked, 'May I introduce my most important aides? This is my prime minister, Kanakhala. She takes care of the administrative, revenue and protocol matters.' (67 IOM)

Her authority is derived from her intelligence and ability, not from her gender or family connections. This portrayal directly challenges the traditional stereotype of women being relegated to domestic or submissive roles. Her position demonstrates that a woman can and should hold a position of leadership and power, where her counsel is respected and vital to the functioning of the state.

Kankhala is faced with a moral dilemma when she discovers a plot involving her king, Daksha, and the evil Vidyunmali. She decides to put justice and the truth ahead of allegiance to her dishonest leader. Her choice to leave her position and, in the end, end her life rather than participate in an illegal act is a potent testament to her unwavering morals. This demonstration is a strong denial of a system that would compel her to violate her morals. From a feminist standpoint, it emphasizes how a woman asserts her autonomy and moral agency even in the face of death by refusing to play a role in a patriarchal power struggle.

Kankhala's character offers a critical examination of how power can corrupt even an apparently developed society. It is necessary to view her suicide as a dramatic, last act of defiance against a morally bankrupt patriarchal system. She symbolically escapes the bonds of a system that has turned against her principles by deciding to die rather than serve an unjust king. By doing this, she guarantees that her legacy will be one of defiance and integrity, making her a symbol of moral strength.

Thus, her character is essentially a potent feminist statement about the value of moral courage, professional excellence, and a woman's right to refuse to participate in an unfair system, even if it means her own life.

Sati

In Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy, Sati is a pivotal character who embodies female empowerment. While she is depicted with remarkable physical beauty, her qualities extend far beyond her appearance. The first glimpse of Sati in the first of the Trilogy occurs when Shiva meets her outside the temple. She rode in on a chariot, guiding

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the horses expertly into the courtyard, while a lady companion by her side held on to the railings. She dismounted the chariot with an air of confidence. It was a calm confidence which had not covered the ugly distance towards arrogance. Her walk was dignified. Stately enough to let a beholder know that she was detached, but not cold.
Sati comes out of the temple and questions staring Shiva 'Excuse me, is there a problem?' here, her boldness in questioning a stranger is perfectly illustrated. (48 IOM)
That moment Shiva was alerted by a quick movement from the cucumber seller. Shiva turned to see him pulling out a sword as he tossed his shawl aside. The shepherd and the man next to the chariot also stood poised in traditional fighter positions with their swords drawn. In a flash Shiva drew his sword and stretched out his left hand protectively, to pull the object of his protective hand, reached into the folds of her Angvastram and drew out her own sword. Surprised Shiva flashed her quick, admiring smile. Her eyes flashed right back, acknowledging the unexpected yet providential partnership. Shiva and the lady stood back to back in a defensive partner position, covering all the directions of any possible attack. (50 The Immortals of Meluha).
Amish's portrayal Sati is not less to Shiva in valor. Sati's portrayal is particularly significant because she is a widow and a 'Vikarma', an untouchable, at the beginning of the story. Geetha's emphasis on intersectionality is crucial for analyzing the power and inequality faced by Sati, who is born as a high class princess and the daughter of ruling class i.e. Emperor Daksha, but her status as a Vikarma, one who has given birth to a stillborn or deformed child, intersects with her gender to create a unique form of social stigma and inequality. In the novel's society, a 'Vikarma' is someone ostracized due to a personal tragedy, such as a stillborn child or an incurable disease, a belief that attributes these misfortunes to the individual's past sins, but Shiva, challenges these social conventions by choosing to marry Sati. Sati navigates her role in a world that has already decided her place within it, yet she refuses to be merely a passive participant.
Sati is repeatedly shown providing crucial counsel, making her integral to the unfolding of events and an active participant in shaping the course of history. She is a fierce warrior with exceptional martial skills, courage, and compassion. Her last fight in her life was with Swuth.
Swuth whirled around, stunned. Sati was up on one knee. She was breathing rapidly, forcing some strength into her debilitated body. She had dug her sword into the ground and her right hand was on its hilt as she tried to use the leverage to push herself up. She failed, took quick breaths, Swuth stared at Sati, dumbstruck. She was completely soaked in her own blood, there were cavernous wounds all over her body, and her hands were shivering with the tremendous pain she was in. her soul must know that death was just minutes away. Tears sprang into Swuth's eyes as his heart felt immeasurably heavy. This indeed was his final kill, and removed his mask. Unlike all his other weapons, this sword was marked. It was marked with the name of their God, Aten. Below that had been inscribed the name of the devotee, Swuth. Swuth bowed low before Sati, and Swuth went down on one knee. He had to give Sati an honorable death. (476-478, Oath of the Vayuputras)
Patel, P. (2018) in his study, 'Ethical Wisdom and Philosophical Judgment in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy', rightly observes that both Sati and Kanakhala had chance of choice, but they choose the path to truth, which lead them to their death in fighting for the great cause. Here, the writer also presents the most powerful demonstration of Sati's character, where she contradicts the traditional *Sati myth*. She did not immolate herself due to grief or duty, but consciously 'left her human body through her yogic power'. This assertion of ultimate bodily and spiritual control is a definitive characteristic rejection of the mythological and historical *Sati* practice, where the act is characterized by patriarchal duty and expectation. Her autonomous departure re-frames her death not as a tragedy resulting from submission, but as an act of sovereign will power. Hence, Tripathi masterfully depicts Sati's decisions and valiant stances throughout the Shiva Trilogy, offering a convincing demonstration of his impartial portrayal of women characters. Sati serves as a powerful example of a female character who subverts conventional gender roles and embodies the principles of performativity by challenging societal scripts. Sati's character demonstrates Butler's theory by showing that gendered status is a social construct, not an essential truth: She is defined by her "performance" as a talented blades-woman and a courageous figure, attributes traditionally assigned to male warriors. By acting with wisdom, skill, and integrity, she breaks the prescribed, passive role of the cursed woman, thereby showing that the feminine role is flexible and can incorporate traits like leadership and martial prowess typically reserved for the dominant gender.

Kali

Kali's initial portrayal is that of a terrifying and ruthless fighter, serving as the leader of the Nagas, a tribe feared for their ferocity. Her physical appearance, with her dark complexion and scarred face, is an immediate subversion of traditional beauty standards. This portrayal of a warrior woman, who is unapologetically aggressive and dominant, challenges the stereotype of women as meek and passive. She is a force to be reckoned with, both on

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the battlefield and in her convictions. She is portrayed as a powerful and complex character who embodies the full spectrum of female strength, challenging conventional perceptions of divinity and femininity. She is initially introduced as a disfigured, vengeful, and brutal warrior, but her character evolves to reveal a deeper, more nuanced identity. She carries the emotional weight of her past, particularly the death of her husband, which fuels her rage and desire for vengeance. Her disfigurement is not just physical; it is a manifestation of her internal pain. Her character arc is one of healing and self-acceptance. She learns to forgive herself and others, transforming her rage into a source of protective strength.

Her power comes from her strength, her intelligence, and her unwavering loyalty to her people. She is both a destroyer and a protector, embodying the dual nature of creation and annihilation. In this way, she represents an unfiltered, authentic form of female power that does not conform to patriarchal expectations. Doshi (2023) in his work, 'Image of 'New Women' in Shiva Trilogy: A Study', aptly comments that Amish's portrayals of divine figures such as 'Sati' and 'Kali' challenge traditional concepts of femininity and godhood found in Hindu mythology. Kali's narrative is a testament to the idea that a woman's true strength lies in her ability to embrace all aspects of herself, including her flaws and her anger, and to channel that into a force for good. She has direct, no-nonsense approach and she is committed to her people and their cause, even ready to resort to violence. She is a formidable leader who prioritizes action over empty words.

'I am not here to negotiate. I am here to ensure justice is served, and if that means spilling blood, then so be it. The Nagas do not shy away from what is necessary.'

Beneath her hardened exterior, there is a woman who has endured immense pain. Her emotional depth prevents her from being a one-dimensional 'angry warrior' and makes her rage understandable, if not always justifiable.

'A quiet moment where Kali is alone, looking at her reflection in a still pool of water. She touches the scars on her face, a look of profound sorrow crossing her features. These scars are not just from battle, but from a past trauma that continues to haunt her, likely the death of her husband, which is a central part of her backstory.'

She would deliver this in a moment of vulnerability, which reveals the source of her power: her deep capacity for love and loyalty, which she channels into protecting those she cares about.

'Do not mistake my strength for a lack of heart. I would give my life a thousand times over for my people, just as I would for the man I once loved. That love, that loyalty, is what makes me strong.'

She is a highly intelligent and tactical leader. Her wisdom, often born from her years of hardship, makes her insights invaluable to the war effort. This challenges the stereotype of a 'brute' and establishes her as a complex, well-rounded leader.

Krittika

Krittika is a supporting character who is the best friend and handmaiden of Princess Sati. Krittika is also the wife of Veer Bhadra, who is Shiva's close childhood friend and a captain in his army. She is unable to have children due to the negative effects of Somras. Despite this personal hardship, she plays a maternal role in the narrative, acting as a "second mother" to Shiva and Sati's son, Kartik, who is named after her. This demonstrates her nurturing and compassionate nature. She is supportive, resilient, charming and spirited.

After a tense battle skirmish, while sitting in camp with currently brooding Veer Bhadra, who is inspecting a small, bloody nick on his forearm, she exhibits her amazing support, spirit and charm.

'Then you would have simply been forced to kill one more, and you would have done so. You are Veer Bhadra, remember? The one who faced a tiger. You were not slow; you were being thoughtful—which is a new habit you should keep, by the way.' 'Ah, but the Guna skirmishes didn't have spice, did they? This is the grand adventure! You are fighting for an entire civilization now, my love, not just for a handful of goats. And a messy fight just means a necessary one.' (IOM)

Thus, in 'The Shiva Trilogy', author Amish Tripathi offers a feminist perspective on divinity by creating complex and powerful female characters who represent strength, resilience, and wisdom. (Doshi, P. 2023)

Veerni

Veerni is the Queen of the Meluhans and the wife of Emperor Daksha. Her character is depicted as a supportive and maternal figure. Her role is largely confined to the royal court, where she supports her husband, the emperor, and fulfills her duties as queen and mother, yet her opposition to Daksha's schemes, her profound sense of duty as a mother and Queen, and her willingness to accept accountability for past wrongs, presents her as a strong-willed noble woman, who is guided by a sense of correct moral action. Addressing her daughter Kali (who had been ostracized) and her grandson Ganesh, she reveals her regret and accepts her failure to perform her moral duty.

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'I have been unfair to the both of you.'
She explicitly states that a wife's duty is not to support a husband's misdeed, but to correct him, showing a strong moral compass. *'It is not a wife's duty to support her husband in his misdeed. In fact, a good wife corrects her husband when he is wrong, even if she has to ram it down his throat. But I failed in my duty as a mother. I should have abandoned my husband when he refused to accept you.'*
Later, as the city is falling and Kali tries to urge her to leave, she made the final choice to die with her subjects, which proves her deep commitment to her role as Queen of Meluha, prioritizing duty over self-preservation.
'A Queen's life is tied to her people, my daughter. To flee now would be a greater betrayal than any committed by your father. I will die with my subjects. I have made my choice.'
Beyond Veerni, other female characters confirm the trilogy's commitment to varied female competence. **Anandmayi**, the Chandravanshi princess, represents the liberal, 'un-gendered' power ideal often associated with the Chandravanshi civilization. She is portrayed as a confident, capable warrior who is explicitly bold and unashamed of her sensuality. Her character embodies the ideal of a woman who is not defined by gender bias. Similarly, **Tara** demonstrates high-level administrative capacity within Meluhan governance, particularly in science and technology. The existence of these figures confirms that women are not merely warriors in the trilogy but are also crucial political, intellectual, and technological architects of civilization. Hence, by fostering a progressive vision of womanhood rooted in an idealized historical past, Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy makes a lasting contribution to the ongoing dialogue concerning gender equality within the context of Hindu cultural tradition

CONCLUSION

This academic paper examines the treatment of female characters in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*, identify structured reinterpretations of gender roles, evaluate these against historical realities, and synthesize the application of a modern, feminist lens. The female characters in the *Shiva Trilogy* are intentionally constructed as powerful figures whose roles are crucial to the action of the work and its philosophical direction, fulfilling the objective of providing detailed character profiles. The analysis of Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* confirms that the trilogy successfully applies a modern, liberal, and feminist lens to ancient Hindu characters. The systematic examination, structured around detailed character profiles and specific textual analysis of the current study, clearly demonstrates a deliberate revolt from traditional androcentric discourse and the patriarchal constraints historically imposed on female figures in post-Vedic mythology. The findings of this research unequivocally establish the ability of female characters to affect the events of the trilogy's narrative innovation. The profile of Sati, in particular, illustrates the author's narrative commitment to female autonomy, transforming her from the traditional archetype of a passive, sacrificial figure to in a dynamic, sovereign political strategist and an 'epitome of women empowerment'. Her resilience and self-determination are not peripheral to the plot, but rather redefine the mythological narrative itself, challenging the restrictive ideals of female submission. Furthermore, the portrayal of key female figures in the Shiva Trilogy successfully 'un-genders' them by attributing qualities typically associated with masculinity such as intelligence, courage, strategic planning, and leadership thereby challenging established gender roles. This reinterpretation of gender is intrinsically linked to the struggle for equality and a necessary re-establishment of a more compassionate and inclusive moral code. Through specific narrative arcs, such as Shiva's decision to marry a *Vikarma* widow, the trilogy directly challenges complex contemporary social issues, including the prejudice surrounding widow remarriage, thus elevating the status of women and critiquing existing social bias. By depicting Shiva as a model of reformed masculinity a figure whose heroism is defined by his active rebellion of patriarchal laws and his reverence for female agency the text constructs a powerful counter-narrative to traditional gender roles. In synthesis, the Shiva Trilogy provides a framework through which ancient myths are related to contemporary discussions on gender equality and empowerment. The portrayal of female characters in the Shiva Trilogy supports Butler's theory by illustrating that gendered status is a social construct, not an inherent truth. Their identities are primarily defined by their performances as a talented scientist, warriors, intellect, strength attributes traditionally associated with men rather than by essential feminine qualities.
In summary, the female characters in the Shiva Trilogy can be seen as powerful examples of Geetha's intersectional theory. Their personal power and challenges stem not merely from being female, but are deeply shaped by how their gender intersects with factors like social stigma e.g. Vikarma and Naga status, class e.g. royalty and professional standing, and the ideological control of powerful social institutions like the Meluhan legal system and patriarchal family structures. They are presented as agents who actively resist the social forces that attempt to construct their identities as weak or subordinate. Future research should critically examine whether the success of these post-feminist portrayals in popular fictional works inadvertently limits the space for narratives that address the systemic, day-to-day struggles faced by women in contemporary Indian society.

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