



# A Posthuman Analysis Of The Grotesque In Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*

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## **Abstract:**

The intersection of mythology and contemporary literary forms offers new insights into cultural narratives and their representation of identity, agency, and existence. In particular, the retellings of Indian mythology have come more and more to adapt to modern sensibilities and frameworks of understanding. One compelling lens through which to explore these transformations is the concept of the "posthuman" which challenges traditional notions of humanity and its boundaries. Environmental post humanities, as a sub-genre focus on Nature as an active agent capable of influencing human behavior and societal structures. It deconstructs dualisms like nature/culture, human/nonhuman and subject/object to emphasize the interconnectedness of all life forms. This paper makes a post human material analysis of the grotesque characters in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* to show that they embody hybrid identities that reflect and critique contemporary societal and ecological concerns.

**Keywords:** Grotesque, liminal, hybridity, abject.

## **Introduction – Grotesque**

The grotesque, as a literary and artistic device, has long been employed to evoke a sense of horror, absurd and monstrosity. It serves as a means to confront the limitations of human experience, often blurring the lines between the human and the non-human, the real and the imagined. In the context of Indian mythology, the grotesque is particularly significant, given the rich tapestry of deities, demons, and hybrid beings that populate these narratives. These figures often embody multiple perspectives, serving as both embodiments of divine power and harbingers of chaos. A post human analysis of these grotesque characters can uncover the ways in which they subvert established hierarchies of being and knowledge, inviting readers to reconsider their understanding of humanity and its relationship to the cosmos. A posthuman material analysis emphasizes the significance of the physicality of these grotesque characters. It explores how their forms and attributes reflect broader cultural and philosophical ideas.

The grotesque often embodies excess, distortion, and deviation from the norm, challenging traditional aesthetics and hierarchies of beauty. According to Alireza the main features of grotesque include dissonance, extremism, exaggeration, the abnormal, the absurd, and the terrifying (26). Despite their widespread presence, grotesque is defined by cultural uniqueness, as each society has its own interpretation of what constitutes a monster. Grotesque is deeply connected to the culture that creates it and cannot be fully examined or comprehended without considering the cultural context from which it

originates. There is a plethora of grotesque characters in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* which include novels such as *Immortals of Meluha*, *Secret of Nagas* and *Oath of Vayuputras*. And the presence of these grotesque characters appears in various forms and demonstrates that they cross geographical, social, and cultural lines.

Lord Ganesh's visage resembles that of an elephant, characterized by an exceptionally broad forehead, a long trunk, and large, drooping ears. Maya, the sister of King Athithigva, embodies two people sharing a single form, with two arms, four shoulders, and two heads. Kali is adorned with bony protrusions that resemble a garland and has extra limbs, giving her a deformed appearance. By depicting them as post-human forms that are understood in relation to their surroundings, Tripathi encourages a relational perspective on existence, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various entities within ecosystems and societies. Although their monstrous, ostracized appearances reflect marginalized ecosystems, many of these grotesque figures assert their agency in ways that challenge traditional power structures.

### **Grotesque as Liminal Entities: Posthuman hybridity:**

It is essential to realise that body is inherently a symbolizing entity, serving as a platform for constructing a detailed narrative of posthuman experiences and the politics of embodiment. Grotesque bodies exist both within and beyond human world. They are identified by their deviation from traditional aesthetics of beauty. Their physical form serves as the primary and obvious sign of their distinctiveness and, thus, their monstrous nature. Essentially, monsters can either be individuals with atypical physical features or those who act immorally. In some cases, it can be a blend of both the former and latter. The multiplicity that plays out through their hybrid and fragmentary bodies exiles them to the realm of the grotesque and the monstrous or what could be called 'grotesquely monstrous'.

In Tripathi's novels, the grotesques are depicted with an unexpected emotional depth, which challenges the traditional divide between human and non-human. Yet, the Trilogy's more profound critique of how culture constructs monstrosity is most evident in its depiction of the creatures' physical forms. They are presented as congenital anomalies yet are deeply intertwined with social and cultural realities, thus straddling the line between reality and abstraction. They exist in a liminal space between the normal and the abnormal, the familiar and the unfamiliar. These creatures also create a symbolic threshold with their contradictions, embodying both societal fears and forbidden desires. Through their exaggerated, lacking, or hybrid physical characteristics, grotesque become "the harbinger of category crisis" (Cohen 6). The intertwining of the grotesque-object with the monstrous in the novel's depiction of these bodies and the reactions they provoke further amplifies this state of liminality. According to Kristeva, the abject body, defined by "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4), along with the grotesque body that is excessive and exaggerated, are transitional bodies. The contradictory feelings of repulsion and attraction that these grotesquely formed monstrous abject bodies evoke contribute to their ambiguous nature.

Maya's story highlights various forms of liminality, with Amish Tripathi's narrative bringing them into focus. Maya Athithigva, the sister of the King of Kashi, like other Nagas, exists on the boundary between humanity and monstrosity. The physical transformation Maya experiences shift her decisively from this boundary into the domain of monstrosity. She transitions from the space between human and monster to another ambiguous realm, marked by her newly attained monstrous identity. The Naga woman was actually two women in one body. The body was one from the chest down. But there were two sets of shoulders, fused to each other at the chest, each with a single arm dangling in either direction. The Naga had two heads. One body, two arms, four shoulders and two heads (SON 91).

The Nagas could be called as hybrid monsters. Due to their ambiguous physical nature, the Nagas resist any efforts to fit into established categories. By using myth as a metaphor, the novelist details the particularities of the Naga bodies and highlights their hybrid nature. This hybridity is marked by an excess of features, exaggeration, and perpetual transformation, causing their bodies to appear strange, mismatched, and resistant to classification. Nandi says to Lord Shiva about Nagas in the following lines: They are born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous births. Deformities like extra hands or horribly misshapen faces (IMM 44).

Bakhtin challenges the notion of a self-contained, individual body in his book *Rabelais and His World*, he describes the grotesque body as one that "extends, swells, grows, or branches out" (16). Similar to Bakhtin's definition of grotesque, Kali describes the bizarre features of Nagas as:

Nagas are born with small outgrowths, which don't seem like much initially but are actually years of torture continued Kali. It almost feels like a demon has taken over your body. And he's bursting out from within, slowly over many years, causing soul crushing pain that becomes your constant companion... (OOV 21).

Their embodied existence reflects the lived realities of a community affected by environmental exploitation. Kali explains to Lord Shiva:

Our bodies get twisted beyond recognition so that by adolescence, when further growth finally stops, we are stuck with what Brahaspati politely calls "deformities." I call it the wages of sins that we didn't even commit. We pay for the sins others commit by consuming the Somras. (OOV 16).

According to Hugo:

everything in creation is not humanly beautiful, [...] the ugly exists beside the beautiful, the unshapely beside the graceful, the grotesque on the reverse of the sublime, evil with good, darkness with light (345).

If for Hugo the grotesque testifies to man's imperfect nature, "the human beast" (350), it is not, as in Ruskin, a sign of man's imperfect vision, which if removed would leave only the sublime. The grotesque characters in these novels emphasize the extreme and bizarre features of monstrous forms, not only depicting how these varied forms are pushed to the margins but also highlighting their potential to challenge norms by concentrating on their transitional nature.

### **Grotesque as Symbol of Environmental Degradation:**

While Hugo explores the grotesque in relation to the sublime, ecocritical writers apply a similar approach to environmental issues, using stark imagery to convey ecological realities. Ecocritical writers extend beyond conventional boundaries to portray the 'grotesque' and 'distorted,' with the goal of not only elucidating ecological catastrophes but also capturing their grim and warped imagery. Within this framework, they create engaging narratives, images, and symbols that convey the pervasive yet subtle violence of delayed effects. Amish Tripathi vividly portrays the grotesque bodies which serves as the bridge between abstract ecological concepts and tangible human experiences.

These grotesque mythical figures that occupy liminal space embody ecological processes and environmental anxieties. Their deformities are not their inherent characteristic but are the result of material practices like the manufacture of 'Somras'. This elixir enhances life for some people while in others it causes cell mutations that make them toxic in ecological and societal sense. It maintains the grotesque body in a state of constant transformation which is described by Bakhtin as "a body in the act of becoming" (Bakhtin 317). The hybrid bodies of Nagas which remains incomplete, is always in the state of becoming. Generally, the cell division of human beings eventually reaches a stage in which they can no longer be divided. As more cells in the body reach this critical point, the aging process begins, eventually resulting in cell death. Consumption of somras removed this limitation and kept the consumer young. This ongoing cell division is regulated in most individuals. However, in some cases, certain cells lose this control and begin to rapidly multiply. "These cells continue to grow, leading to abnormalities, such as extra limbs or an unusually long nose" (OOV 21). The persistent use of Somras causes "deformities" in "a few babies...in the womb...[who] are born Naga" (OOV 14). Nagas are ostracized and exiled to a place called Panchavati, for no fault of theirs.

On the other hand, 'Somras' also plays a vital role in the prosperity of Meluha. It could be viewed as a 'post human project' that helps Meluhans to transcend human limitations and bestows them with extended lifespan unperturbed by the process of natural decay. Consequently, this post human project creates a dual reality as marginalised communities like Nagas suffer the ecological consequences of 'Somras', capitalist Meluhans thrive.

The voracious exploitation of earth's natural resources by the Suryavanshis' insatiable greed to create somras and to expand their life span, leads to a significant threat to the planet's ability to sustain life. The Suryavanshis who are tasked with protecting the masses are actually posing the greatest danger to them. They possess capitalist mindset which prioritizes material gains over human life, their drive for profit and longevity of life span has exacerbated the disruption of the interdependence between body and space.

The capitalists discard the toxic waste from somras production into the Tsangpo River in Tibet. Due to climate change, these toxins contaminate the Branga river, which causes plague among the Brangans living nearby. The capitalists' interactions with both human and non-human elements lead to the deterioration of their bodies and the natural world. This process of toxic contamination is a form of 'slow violence'. Rob Nixon describes the phenomenon as "slow violence," (2). Characterizing it as a form of brutality that unfolds gradually and remains hidden, a type of destruction that is spread out over time and space.

The physical manifestations observed in the Nagas serve as a representation of the interplay between human aspirations and ecological damage. Their deformities are a metaphor for the transmission of toxins across different species and ecosystems, embodying the concept of 'trans-corporeality' as articulated by Stacy Alaimo. Discussing the connection between altered bodies and their surroundings, Alaimo observes that environmental illness exemplifies trans-corporeal space, where the body is intricately connected to the material world, a realm consisting of both emerging, intertwined biological organisms and a variety of human-created xenobiotic substances. Grotesque figures frequently find themselves in or move through transitional spaces. In these shifting environments they represent the flow of matter, toxins, and energies that blur the distinction between the human body and its surrounding environment.

Environmental factors inevitably influence one another. As a result of the interaction between various entities, man is compelled to look beyond the surface and the immediate issues to address the eco-social injustices in the face of environmental catastrophes which includes cancer, infertility, growth retardation, and physical deformities. Lord Shiva envisions a more inclusive society where marginalized individuals with deformities can find their place and express themselves. Acknowledging humanity's entangled existence with the non-human world he leads a biopolitical resistance against the capitalist systems that pathologies marginalised bodies. Thus, the grotesque mythical figures in the *Trilogy* not only embody ecological and cultural interconnectedness but also exemplify environmental justice within a post human material ecocritical framework.

### **Conclusion:**

Amish Tripathi adeptly merges mythology with real-world calamities, tackling a pressing contemporary issue: chemical poisoning manifesting in physical deformities that align with grotesque. He advocates for a more egalitarian and responsible approach to a sharing earth's resources. By examining the interplay between power and ecology in his *Trilogy* he redefines the traditional understanding of grotesque as a representation of fear. He instead presents them as a transformative space of post human promise. By highlighting the shared vulnerability of life on Earth in the face of ecological damage, Tripathi subtly dismantles any man-made hierarchical distinctions that place humans above other species. His *Trilogy* ultimately recognizing the inherent value and interconnectedness of all life forms, even those seemingly marred by the grotesque.

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