Language of the Divine: Semiotic Transformations in the *Shiva Trilogy* and *Ram Chandra Series*

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S. Gayathri
PG & Research Department of English
The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam college for women (Autonomous), Tamil Nadu, India
(Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai)
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0122-4943

V.S. Shakila
Research Supervisor & Assistant Professor
PG & Research Department of English
The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women (Autonomous), Tamil Nadu, India
(Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai)
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0761-6290

Abstract
This article provides a theoretically grounded qualitative textual analysis of how Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra Series and Shiva Trilogy use semiotics, myth, and memory to create a cultural narrative relevant to the contemporary South Asian context. The study uses semiotic theory (Lotman, Barthes,) and structuralist myth theory, South Asian mnemocultural traditions as detailed in Cultures of Memory in South Asia (Rao), and Jan and Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory to show how Tripathi's character names (like Neelkanth, Ikshvaku, and Somras), symbols, epithets, and invented vocabulary serve as active semiotic nodes within a cultural hemisphere in addition to being decorative. These markers evoke inherited memory, such as ritual, lineage, and sacred cosmology, and negotiate the demands of modern sensibility, such as accessibility, moral complexity, and scientific metaphors. Through close reading of key passages of the novels, this study examines how myth is both preserved and transformed by citing how Neelkanth is repeatedly associated with poison, sacrifice, and wilderness, layering icon, index, and symbol, and how Somras blends Vedic ritual imagery with the trope of "elixir" to evoke both mystical and chemical semiotic registers, and how the archaizing diction and linguistic hybridization evoke mnemocultural inheritance. This article argues that Tripathi's works act as memory spaces in the "Assmannian sense" and sites where collective memory is objectified and sustained through literature, ritual vocabulary, genealogical names, and narrative structure. Finally, the article argues that in the South Asian context, where oral tradition, genealogical consciousness, epics, and puraṇas have long shaped literary form, Amish's semiotic innovations are a continuation and reinvention; myth does not become fossilized but is reanimated to meet the ethical, cultural, and aesthetic needs of the present.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Mnemoculture, Mythological Fiction, Postcolonial Myth, Semiotic Analysis.

Introduction

In South Asia, myth is fundamental to popular culture, ritual, and identity narratives, as well as its classical manifestations such as Purāṇas, Itihāsas, genealogy, and folk stories. According to Jan Assmann's theories of cultural memory, the distinction between historical memory and cultural memory, certain symbols, rituals, writings, and epithets become "objectified culture" because they act as archives of a common, frequently holy past. In *Cultures of Memory in South Asia*, D. Venkat Rao highlights that memory in South Asia is embodied not only in literature but also in idiom, orality, gesture, genealogical consciousness, and vernacularity.

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* and *Ram Chandra Series* engage myth and memory in this South Asian field as they do not simply retell epic or Purāṇic stories but redefine them semiotically by introducing new names, reinterpreting characters, inventing vocabulary, and blending ritual and science so that myth becomes legible, affective, moral, and modern. This study examines how these textual moves participate in building a *semiosphere* (Lotman) in which memory is active, contested, and dynamic rather than static or mummified. This article deepens the study by incorporating myth and memory scholarship (Assmann, Rao) and South Asian literary theory. Ramanujan's thoughts, Purāṇic genealogies, narrative time, oral vs literate modes. The article concludes by arguing that retelling myths is more than a myth; it is an act of semiotic and memory work that contributes to contemporary Indian cultural identity. Grounding its analysis in semiotic theory, this article extends beyond Tripathi studies and contributes to the semiotics of religion, modern myth criticism, popular fiction theory, and cultural significance studies. This demonstrates that contemporary Indian mythic fiction operates not merely as a commercial retelling but as a complex symbolic economy where tradition, modernity, rationality, and sacred authority intersect through language. While the article primarily centres on literary and semiotic dimensions, there remains scope to extend the discussion into socio-political contexts such as identity and ideology, thereby broadening its cultural relevance. Concepts like "semiosphere" and "memory space" add significant intellectual depth, and these ideas offer valuable opportunities for future studies to connect them more closely with empirical or practical applications. Linguistic and translation studies are also valuable for understanding how semiotic meaning shifts across languages and audiences.

Theoretical Framework:

Assmannian Perspective of Myth & Memory

Jan Assmann distinguishes two forms of memory. Historical memory, which is linked to temporality, facts, and chronicles, and cultural memory, which is linked to the institutional, ritualistic, symbolic, and objectified through monuments, texts, epithets, and ritual vocabulary. Myth is a central part of cultural memory because it fuses worldviews, ethical orientations, and genealogical legitimacy. Myths are not simply "old stories" but narratives through which communities reconstruct their identity, origins, sacred history, and moral norms. They provide "justification" for the present via the past and assume that social memory is based on sacred ordering.

South Asian Cultural Memory and Mnemocultures

D. Venkat Rao's *Cultures of Memory in South Asia* elaborates how orality, genealogy, vernacular idiom, and performative ritual are constitutive of memory. In this model, written or oral texts, names, family genealogies, and spoken ritual formulas are nodes of memory, which Rao calls *mnemotexts* or *mnemocultural* symbolization. Nora describes lieux de mémoire as "moments of history torn away from the movement of history" (1989, p. 12), highlighting how memory is artificially preserved when lived experience fades. These are not secondary or derivative; they are central to how cultural consciousness in South Asia is structured. The body, chant, name, and even the vernacular hybrid mix are part of that inheritance.

Semiotic Theory, Structuralism, and South Asian Literary Theory

Semiotic theory provides tools for analyzing mythmaking. Lotman's semiosphere allows us to consider the totality of symbolic relations in which mythic and mundane signs interact. Barthes's *Mythologies* reminds us of how myths naturalize certain symbolic orders, such as lineage, holiness, and the divine. Lévi Strauss's Structuralist myth theory suggests that myth can be broken into *mythemes* that are constituent minimal units of myth and see how binary oppositions, transformations, and mediations operate. South Asian literary theory adds particular affinities, Ramanujan's reflections on how oral and written modes differ in telling, the importance of genealogies (*vaṃsāvali*), the embeddedness of names in castes, lineages, places, the resonance of Sanskrit-derived vocabulary even when mediated through vernacular or English, the way myth time is non-linear, cyclic, cosmological (yugas, kalpas) yet

tales often reframe them in narrative sequence for modern readers. By combining all these theories, this paper explores the analytic lens for Tripathi's work, tracing how myth functions as memory, how names, symbols, and invented words constitute *objectified culture*, and how mythic temporality and narrative form interact with modern prose and sensibility.

Discussion

Names and Epithets as Memory Anchors

Neelkanth

Each name in Tripathi's writing has deep cultural, cosmological, ethical, and genealogical significance. In *The Immortals of Meluha*, Shiva transforms into *Neelkanth* when he consumes Somras, a poison-like substance ejected from the churning of the ocean. Tripathi writes, *"He drank it… and his throat turned blue-black… they called him Neelkanth."* The name is thus indexical; it records a physical transformation, but is also iconic in that its blue throat becomes visual and memorable. However, it is more than that; the name carries the mythic memory of sacrifice, of liminal identity not quite gods, humans, of moral and cosmic boundary crossing. In subsequent appearances, Tripathi plays with the name, not just as an identifier but as a symbol. In *The Secret of the Nagas*, for instance, *Neelkanth* is repeatedly used by people with reverence, fear, or hope. The name becomes a locus of identity for the individual. When Shiva doubts his purpose, the name itself reminds both the character and the reader of the cosmic promise and the memory of his initial sacrifice. According to Deepak Kumar, the narrative illustrates how the people of Meluha hold a belief in an idealized figure - the Neelkanth, their prophesied savior–and firmly anticipate the arrival of a man with a blue throat to deliver them (Kumar and Kumar 662). This storyline evokes associations with Lord Shiva, whose throat turns blue after ingesting poison. The repetition of *Neelkanth* functions like a ritual invocation in the narrative by reviving its earlier meaning every time.

Ikshvaku

In *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*, Amish positions *Ikshvaku* not simply as an ancestor but as a symbolic ground. The prologue often narrates the history of the Ikshvaku vaṃśa, responsibilities, virtues, sins, and dynastic memory. Rama's reflections on being of the Ikshvaku lineage appear throughout the text during times of crisis, such as exile, duty, and betrayal. For example, when Rama leaves Ayodhya, the knowledge of being the heir to Ikshvaku's virtues becomes both a burden and an anchor of identity, legitimacy, and moral compass. The name *Ikshvaku* thus becomes a "memory device. It draws on the mythic past of Ikshvaku kings, Purāṇic lineages, and cosmological orders. It also evokes the ancestral authority. Furthermore, by invoking *Ikshvaku*, Tripathi activates genealogical consciousness, which is deeply significant in South Asian memory. As Rao describes, lineage is not just a family tree but also memory, legitimacy, and sacred identity.

Somras

Although *Somras* is a constructed term, it is deeply rooted in the Vedic ritual memory of *soma* and *amrita*. Tripathi's usage goes beyond mere drink, and Somras becomes contested in politics, science, morality, and how it reshapes the human and divine boundary. In the War *of Lanka*, for example, Somras is tied to bioengineering, to experiments, to prophecy. When characters debate it, it is not only about power, but also about identity, what it means to be divine, past ritual, ancient sacrifices that is the drinking of soma bana, and contemporaneous ethical concerns like life extension, colonialism, and power imbalance. The semiotic weight is multiplicative by projecting Somras as object, symbol, contested signifier. These names and epithets thus function as what Assmann would call *objectified memory,* as they are not only parts of narrative, but also stable symbolic resources in the semiosphere of cultural memory. Names become compressed cultural archives, and mythic categories are reframed as historically situated identities rather than as metaphysical absolutes. This strategy democratizes sacred vocabulary without diluting its symbolic density, enabling myths to function as a living linguistic system.

Neologism and Mythic Vocabulary

Tripathi created and repurposed terms such as Ayodhaan, Shivayat, Somras, Pralaya, and Vajra

in new contexts. In The Scion of Ikshvaku, for example, Ayodhaan is emphasized in relation to duty and conflict. According to Tripathi, in *Scion of Ikshvaku, "the drums of Ayodhaan thundered like the heartbeats of heaven."* Ayodhya is conjured by the name "Ayodhaan," yet it has a martial connotation of a war-Ayodhya. The author thus shifts the echo of *Ayodhya* into a battlefield resonance, creating a blend of the familiar and the novel. Similarly, *Shivayat* in the *Shiva Trilogy* evokes cultic order and fellowship around Shiva. Although not a classical term, its morphosyntactic shape resembles Sanskrit-derived terms (*-ayat* suffix, etc.), thereby blending with the archaic context. These strikes become semiotic generators; they link ancestry with earlier forms, establish identification boundaries from which readers learn, whereas insiders use them, and produce vocabulary particular to a given world. Tripathi's hybrid lexical field, which blends archaic diction with accessible modern English, administrative discourse, and scientific metaphor, creates a dual-register narrative that sounds ancient yet remains conceptually contemporary. Through repetition, semantic layering, and contextual explanation, key terms operate as semiotic nodes that evoke lineage, ritual memory, sacred cosmology, and epic cadence, while remaining intelligible to global readers.

Register Mixing and Hybrid Speech

Tripathi's English prose is often interspersed with Sanskrit-derived words, idioms, and colloquial English. For e.g., in *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Rama thinks, *"Duty is a weight you don't feel until you are meant to."* Later, "He stood there, pranama posture, heart heavy." The insertion of *pranama*, a Sanskrit term for a greeting or prostration, within an otherwise English narrative ensures that the sacred register is felt immediately, not through translation but by innate presence. Another example is when another character says, *"This is not just war, yaar—it's dharma."* The colloquial interjection of *"yaar*," a colloquial Indian flavor, together with *dharma,* an ancient concept, makes the mythic feel close, human, and present. It is an intentional semiotic displacement that reminds readers of orality, vernacular speech patterns, and mixed registers in traditional storytelling. To render the figure of Shiva more accessible and familiar to contemporary readers, the author used a colloquial style of English that closely resembles common speech, augmented by American idiomatic expressions. The informal, conversational tone is apparent through the usage of colloquial terms like 'bloody hell,' 'damn it,' and 'bullshit.' This linguistic choice not only improves the story's accessibility but also anchors the extraordinary figures of Hindu mythology in a more accessible, human setting. (Abhila 683). According to Rao, *"cultures of memory that survive and proliferate in speech and gesture"* (Rao,2014, p.59). Language constructs divinity through symbolic structure. Cultural codes shape readers' interpretations of sacred narratives. Semiotics reveals how these novels negotiate ancient scriptural discourse and modern rational discourse.

Archaic Diction and Conscious Archaism

In moments of ritual and tragedy, Tripathi elevates diction, such as descriptions of yajna, veneration, and deity dialogues, often employing archaic poetic imagery, sustained metaphors, and ritual lexicons. For instance, descriptions of fire, yajna flames licking sky, such as *"the sky was rent with the flame of sacrifice, and the smoke curled like celestial fingers."* These phrases recall Purāṇic descriptions, where divine temples and cosmic fires are animated and anthropomorphized. However, this archaic style is always tempered, that is, the narrative rhythm returns to modern pacing, internal monologue, and psychological introspection. Thus, archaic diction becomes a punctuated ritual space, a pause in the flow, echoing between the mythic past and the modern present.

Epithets, Repetition, and Accumulation

Epithets such as *Rudra*, *Vajra*, *Chakra*, *Vanara*, *and Naga* are used in ways that gather mythic resonances. For example, *Rudra* appears in contexts of storm, rage, but also in cosmic calm. Each time the word appears, prior instances shade its meaning, when Shiva is called *Rudra* at one moment, it recalls both his destructive, storm-lord aspect and his inner struggles. *Vajra* is described as a weapon, but it is both literal and symbolic of indestructible truth. Initially *Vajra* is described as a powerful weapon, later it carries metaphorical overtones such as

moral weapon, truth weapon, etc. Tripathi employs repetition to build richness rather than redundancy. His lexical innovations demonstrate continuity with epic and purāṇic traditions even as they reanimate myth for modern ethical, cultural, and aesthetic concerns, ensuring that inherited sacred language is neither fossilized nor ornamental but actively re-signified within contemporary fiction.

Symbolic Analogies

Poison and Sacrifice: The "poison" that becomes *Neelkanth* is central to the narrative. The motif of poison reappears as an internal moral poison, political poison, and betrayal. The narrative employs semiotic transformations of legendary tropes into political and moral metaphors, drawing comparisons between venom and political intrigue. For instance, Shiva's blue throat becomes a mark of distinction that sets him apart from others, symbolizing his unique role as the chosen one while also serving as a physical reminder of his responsibilities and the burden of his destiny. (Karthic, 15098)

Mountains, Forests, Wilderness: Shiva's dwelling in the mountains, solitude, Nisarga (nature) are memory tropes recalling the ascetic past, purāṇic hermits, forest sages. When the characters traverse forests in the *Ram Chandra Series*, the forest is not a mere backdrop; it is a mythic space, a test, a place of exile, a place of memory, and a place of transformation. Vasudev's temples serve as sanctuaries for knowledge and guidance, and their interactions with Shiva often reflect the timeless wisdom associated with Indian philosophy.

Fire and Ritual: Yajna, sacrificial flames, and the ritual setting are symbolic tropes reused in both series. The descriptions become more elaborate when used to mark transitions such as dharma tested, divine revelation, and cosmic turning points.

Intertextuality, Inversion, and Ethical Re-Framing

The canonical Ramayana or Shiva traditions are constantly referred to, but the Amish inverts or reframes them. For example, the portrayal of characters' moral ambiguity, antagonists are not purely evil, and heroes suffer doubts. This reflects modern sensibility but is also consistent with later epic retellings of Kamban, Tulsidas, etc., which sometimes add psychological depth. The 'golden deer' episode is reframed in such a way that the deer's lure is not merely beauty, but is embedded in politics and desire; the consequences are more complex than simple deception. This intertextual echo encourages readers to recall and reconsider the original text. The Vasudevs, who communicate through subtle hints and cryptic messages, represent a mystical and spiritual dimension of the story. Canonical epics often present cosmic time, cycles, and yugas, and manage pacing differently. Tripathi uses narrative sequence and linear progression but embeds flashbacks, legends, and mythic cosmology, resulting in a blending of story time and mythological time, which becomes a part of the memory architecture for readers. Tripathi's novels successfully reinterpret classical mythological figures, not merely as divine icons but as complex philosophical agents whose stories engage enduring human questions. By integrating philosophical inquiry, ethical reflection, and progressive character arcs, especially in the representation of women, the novels provide fresh insights into timeless dilemmas while maintaining accessibility for a broad readership. Overall, Tripathi's mythic retellings serve as cultural texts that connect ancient traditions with contemporary thought, enriching the ongoing dialogue between philosophy, literature, and societal values.

Findings

Tripathi's goal is to help modern readers understand ancient myths. Myths are brought into the present day through moral dilemmas, character interiority, emotional stakes, and discussions with contemporary ideas such as scientific metaphor, political power, and environmental ethics. This can be identified as semiotic bridging, as the mythical past is made morally feasible rather than idealized. For example, the Somras debate in the War *of Lanka* becomes not only about immortality but also about cost and unintended consequences. Such scenes show the mythic symbol of *Somras* carrying modern ethical semiotics, science, experimentation and political misuse. Similarly, the portrayal of women such as Sita, Kaikeyi, and Sati is more

agency endowed. All the female characters question their roles, and mythic ideals are challenged. These women play central roles in decision-making, social transformation, and philosophical discourse within the texts, offering a framework that interrupts the conventional gender norms found in older retellings. This article argues that by elevating female figures, Tripathi contributes to a more progressive and egalitarian understanding of mythological heroines, reflecting contemporary discourses on gender equality in India. Tripathi's reworking aligns with postcolonial literary theory, which demands that myths are not static but are contested and revised. Like the hybrid register, neologism, and archaic diction, Tripathi occasionally puts the reader at a distance with modern idioms in holy settings, science in mythic contexts, and moral ambiguity that undermines archetypes. Reflexivity results from this displacement, as the reader recognizes myth as speech and memory as created. This is particularly important in the postcolonial frame, as it reflects how myths in India are politicized, contested, and often mobilized in nationalist or communal identity. Tripathi's work avoids simplistic recognition, often exploring conflict, downfall, betrayal, and doubt. Thus, myth is not an instrument of propaganda but a space for negotiation, memory, and critique. Amish's texts become what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* or "sites of memory" figurative or narrative where memory crystallizes. The name *Ikshvaku*, the ritual words, the invented vocabulary, and the epithets all become sites of memory. In the Indian postcolonial moment, colonialism disrupted many traditional forms of cultural memory, such as oral transmitters, ritual performance, and the centrality of Sanskrit literature. The rise of English-language myth retellings, popular myth fiction, and fantasy is part of reclaiming myths in new media. Tripathi's novels are a part of this. Through semiotic innovation, they both restore old memory forms such as genealogy, Purāṇic names, and ritual forms and adapt them through modern prose and internal moral conflict, enabling myth to remain relevant.

This study positions contemporary Indian mythological fiction as a complex symbolic economy in which language becomes a site of cultural negotiation, mediating between the past and present, sacred and secular, and tradition and innovation. In both series, gods such as Shiva and Rama are re-presented as historical human figures rather than purely transcendental beings. This shift alters the signifier–signified relationship of the original work. Shiva and Rama function as cultural symbols. Their traditional divine signifiers are replaced by humanized, rationalized identities. Semiotics helps to analyze how these mythic signs are re-coded for a contemporary readership. Sacred symbols such as Neelkanth, Somras, dharma, and divine weapons are reinterpreted scientifically or politically. Semiotics allows readers to examine how traditional mythological signs acquire new meaning. It provides theoretical tools to examine how divine language is reconstructed, how sacred symbols are modernized, and how meaning is culturally negotiated in contemporary mythological fiction. It traces the movement from sacred symbolism to socio-political metaphors. This process exemplifies what Barthes calls myth as a second-order sign system in which cultural meanings are layered and restructured.

This study offers the first systematic semiotic study of divine sign construction in both the Shiva Trilogy and the Ram Chandra Series by Tripathi. Drawing upon classical and structural semiotic frameworks, this study analyzes how divinity is linguistically encoded, symbolically stabilized, and narratively transformed across the two series. Rather than debating the humanization or politicization of mythic figures, it investigates how sacred authority is produced through signifying processes and relational meaning structures in the Qurʾān. By placing both series within a comparative semiotic continuum, this study demonstrates the progressive reconfiguration of divine representation from a disruptive mythic force to codified ethical sovereignty. In doing so, it establishes a theoretically grounded and process-oriented model for understanding meaning-making in contemporary Indian mythic fiction. This study situates itself within a broader intellectual framework that bridges literary criticism with cultural studies, religion, and memory studies. It further incorporates the cultural memory theories of Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, along with South Asian perspectives such as those of D. Venkat Rao, thereby

grounding its analysis in both global and regional intellectual traditions. This study highlights the layered interplay of icons, indices, and symbols in constructing meaning, demonstrating how elements such as ritual vocabulary, genealogical markers, and symbolic motifs evoke inherited cultural memory while simultaneously adapting to contemporary sensibilities.

Conclusion

In Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra Series and Shiva Trilogy, mythmaking is intricately linked to semiotics and cultural memory. Through names such as *Neelkanth*, *Ikshvaku*, *Somras*, epithets, invented vocabulary, hybrid registers, archaic diction, trope of accumulation, and intertextuality, Tripathi builds a semiosphere in which myth is not simply recounted but reinterpreted, remembered, contested, and made meaningful for contemporary readers. The theoretical frameworks of Assmann, such as cultural memory vs historical memory, Rao's *mnemocultural* traditions, semiotic theory, and South Asian literary theory, oral vs written modes, genealogies, and cyclic vs linear time, help clarify how these semiotic transformations operate. Textual analysis reveals that myth in Tripathi does not function merely as nostalgic heritage but as an ethical, identity-forming, narrative force that engages with modern sensibility, moral ambiguity, and the need for cultural reclamation in a postcolonial society. Tripathi's texts reclaim mythic memory, translating it into a modern idiom, and through that translation, revive myth as living and essential. This implies that retellings are crucial to comprehending how cultures remember, how identity is established, and how sacred texts continue to reflect. Lotman argues that cultural meaning emerges through systems of signs, noting that "no language can exist unless it is immersed in the context of culture" (2005, p. 18), which reinforces how literature reflects and shapes societal values. While earlier research occasionally identifies symbols (e.g., Neelkanth, Dharma, Maryada Purushottam), such references are often descriptive rather than theoretically grounded. This article applies Saussure's signifier–signified framework to mythic representation, engaging structural semiotics to trace how signs gain meaning through relational systems and reading myth as a second-order signification process. It evaluates myths as cultural coding rather than divine facts. It examines how language transforms sacred figures into ethical and political symbols. For instance, Shiva is not simply 'humanized'; he becomes a signifier of moral disruption and reform. Rama is not merely idealized; he becomes a coded symbol of the institutionalized dharma. Thus, divinity is analyzed as a semiotic construction rather than a theological given. This theoretical rigor distinguishes this study from interpretive or ideological readings.

A significant aspect of this article lies in its treatment of myth and memory as interconnected processes. The novels are interpreted as "memory spaces" in which collective cultural memories are preserved, reactivated, and transformed. By engaging with South Asian traditions of orality, textuality, and genealogical consciousness, this study emphasizes the continuity between ancient narrative practices and modern literary forms. This shows how myths, rather than being static or fossilized, remain fluid and dynamic, capable of addressing present-day ethical, cultural, and intellectual concerns. Ultimately, this study contributes significantly to multiple academic domains, including the semiotics of religion, modern myth criticism, and popular fiction studies. While previous scholarship has primarily examined these texts through thematic lenses such as nationalism, feminism, secularization, or philosophical reinterpretation, this study reconceptualizes Tripathi's mythological fiction as a structured system of signs. Future research can build on this study by expanding its scope and methodology to create a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary mythological fiction. While the focus on Tripathi provides depth, a comparative analysis with other writers such as Devdutt Pattanaik and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni would help assess the broader applicability of its semiotic and cultural memory framework. Extending the study into socio-political dimensions, including identity, ideology, and power structures, would deepen its cultural relevance, while exploring adaptations across visual and digital media could reveal how myths function in contemporary multi-platform storytelling.

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Author Details

S. Gayathri, *Part –time PhD Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of English , The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam college for women (Autonomous), Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu, India, (Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai)*
***Email ID**: gayurakshu2923@gmail.com*

Dr. V.S. Shakila, *Research Supervisor, Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam college for women (Autonomous), Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu, India, (Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai)*
***Email ID:** shakila-eng@sfrcollege.edu.in*