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FOLKLORE AS A REFLECTION OF NATIONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN FANTASY FICTION

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Annotatsiya

This article examines the function of folklore as both a reflection and a production of national and cultural identity in contemporary fantasy literature, utilising a comparative analysis of J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit (1937) and Neil Gaiman's American Gods (2001). Tolkien uses folklore to create a mythopoeic universe that focusses on cultural continuity, rootedness, and inherited tradition. Gaiman, on the other hand, uses folklore in a postmodern and diasporic way, where identity is broken up, mobile, and based on belief and memory. Utilising theories of cultural memory, nationalism, and myth criticism, this research contends that fantasy fiction serves as a literary domain where folklore is reinterpreted to address issues of belonging, heritage, and power across many historical settings.

Key words

folklore, fantasy fiction, cultural identity, national mythology, Tolkien, Gaiman, mythopoeia, diaspora, cultural memory.

Introduction: Folklore has historically served as a cultural repository, safeguarding communal values, beliefs, and historical narratives through successive generations. In literary fantasy, folklore is seldom replicated in a strictly preservational manner. Instead, it is changed to deal with modern issues like identity, history, and cultural belonging. Fantasy fiction serves as a valuable medium for analysing the functioning of folklore not only as a transmitted tradition but also as a dynamic and ideological tool.

J.R.R. Tolkien and Neil Gaiman exemplify two significant yet divergent methodologies on the use of folklore in fantasy literature. Tolkien's The Hobbit is a product of early twentieth-century intellectual discourse focused on philology, mythopoeia, and the restoration of a perceived cultural deficit in English heritage.[1]In contrast, Gaiman's American Gods takes place in a late twentieth-century, postmodern world that has been changed by globalisation, migration, and media saturation. In this world, folklore is used as a metaphor for cultural displacement and blending.[2]

This study posits that folklore in The Hobbit serves to forge a cohesive cultural identity grounded in geography, ancestry, and moral tradition, whereas in American Gods, folklore

[1] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins, 2001).pp. 3–81.

[2] Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (New York: William Morrow, 2001). pp. 1–465.

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embodies a disjointed, diasporic identity maintained by memory and belief rather than territorial continuity. This study use comparative textual analysis to illustrate how fantasy fiction reflects evolving notions of national and cultural identity.

Methods: This investigation makes use of a qualitative comparative technique that is founded on close textual analysis and theoretical frameworks that are found across several disciplines.

In the first place, a close reading is utilised in order to investigate the narrative structure, characterisation, and symbolic elements that are derived from folkloric traditions presented in both works. The manner in which folklore is incorporated into the construction of the universe, the conversation, and the progression of the story is given special consideration.

In the second place, the research makes use of folklore theory and myth critique, particularly functional approaches that place more of an emphasis on the functions that folklore serves within a story rather than identifying the specific origins of the sources.[3]
Third, notions from cultural and national identity theory are utilised. These concepts include the idea of "imagined communities"[4], which was proposed by Benedict Anderson, the theory of fabricated tradition[5] proposed by Eric Hobsbawm, and the concept of cultural memory proposed by Jan Assmann[6]. It is Tolkien's The Hobbit and Gaiman's American Gods are the two key texts that are being referred to. Some examples of secondary sources include the essay "On Fairy-Stories" written by J.R.R. Tolkien, works of myth theory written by Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade, and modern literary criticism on fantasy and folklore.

Results: 1. The Hobbit's Folklore and the Cultural Rootability of the Story
In The Hobbit, the incorporation of legend into the development of Middle-earth as a culturally consistent and historically profound secondary planet is an essential component. Tolkien's employment of classic folkloric themes, such as dragons, dwarves, riddles, magical things, and heroic quests, attempts to conjure a mythological past that feels both old and continuous. This is accomplished through the usage of these motifs.

It is a culturally stable homeland that is defined by tradition, habit, and shared values, and the Shire is a representation of this. It is this traditional household ideal that first serves as the foundation for Bilbo Baggins' identity. This ideal places an emphasis on hospitality, temperance, and social order. His trip outside follows a framework that is typical of fairy tales, in which one's identity is formed via a series of tests that test one's moral character rather than one's physical ability.[7] Folklore is a form of cultural memory, and the desire of the Dwarves to recover Erebor is an example of this. Their songs and genealogies serve as narrative tools that help to retain the collective identity of the people despite the fact that they have been displaced and lost. According to Anderson's theory of imagined community, shared narratives provide a

[3]Alan Dundes, *Sacred Narrative* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). pp. 1–20; 97–131.
[4] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 1–46.
[5] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1–14.
[6] Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 37–58; 109–140.
[7] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: New World Library, 2008), pp. 23–45.

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sense of belonging that extends beyond the scope of current social engagement. This is consistent with his perspective.[8]

Additionally, Tolkien's concentration on language, riddles, and naming is a reflection of his philological notion that culture is ingrained in words and stories. A prime example of folklore as a performative act of identification is the riddle contest that takes place between Bilbo and Gollum. In this contest, survival is determined not by physical force but by cultural knowledge and linguistic cleverness.[9]

2. The American Gods and Their Relation to Folklore, Migration, and Hybridity

American Gods depicts folklore in a manner that is fractured and displaced, in contrast to Tolkien's legendary realm, which is internally consistent. Gaiman's gods are immigrants, brought to the United States of America by human migration, and they are only maintained by individuals who continue to believe in them.[10] Rather of depicting the United States of America as a cohesive legendary entity, the novel depicts the country as a cultural crossroads. Old gods from Norse, African, and Slavic traditions, as well as other traditions, live harmoniously with new gods of technology, media, and consumerism, causing tension between the two groups. Folklore in this region depicts cultural diversity rather than a unified culture.

Adapting to new circumstances, changing their names, and accepting marginal roles within contemporary society are all ways in which these mythical characters represent the concept of diasporic identity. This is consistent with Assmann's theory of cultural memory, which places an emphasis on the fact that communal remembering is socially mediated and historically dependent.[11] The Folklore is not a stabilising force in American Gods; rather, it is a hazardous force. The concept of belief serves as a type of cultural capital, and myths are lost when groups forget or absorb their traditions. It is a reflection of the disintegration of immigrant identities within mainstream cultural narratives that the gods are falling out of favour.[12]

3. Findings from the Comparison

The comparison investigation uncovers two divergent identity models:

Rooted identity (The Hobbit): Folklore strengthens continuity, legacy, and moral order via established traditions and a sense of belonging.

Mobile identity (American Gods): Folklore illustrates displacement, hybridity, and the endeavour to preserve cultural memory in a multicultural society.

Tolkien's mythopoeia aims to re-establish a feeling of cultural profundity, whereas Gaiman's tale reveals the precariousness of identity in contemporary society.

Discussion: The results of this study indicate that folklore in fantasy fiction functions as a dynamic cultural process rather than a static inheritance of traditional themes. Folklore is used in both The Hobbit and American Gods to talk about issues of cultural belonging, historical continuity, and identity creation. However, the two novels use folklore in very different ways and for very different purposes. These disparities signify extensive historical, cultural, and philosophical transformations in the conceptualisation of identity over the twentieth and early

[8] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso Books, 2006), pp. 48–65.
[9] Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), pp. 33–74
[10] Gaiman, *American Gods*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 2001), pp. 120–180.
[11] Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.15–36.
[12] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963), pp. 5–19.

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twenty-first centuries.

Folklore as Cultural Foundation and Mythic Constancy in Tolkien.Folklore serves as a stabilising element in The Hobbit, aiding in the formation of a cohesive cultural identity. Tolkien's mythopoeic endeavour is predicated on the conviction that contemporary civilisation has experienced a deficit of significant myth, leading to cultural disintegration and spiritual disillusionment. Folklore thus serves as a healing instrument for re-establishing a sense of historical depth and moral continuity. This is in line with what Tolkien said in "On Fairy-Stories," where he said that imagination gives people "recovery, escape, and consolation" by reconnecting them with basic truths about people that are found in legendary stories.

The folklore aspects of The Hobbit, like as heroic journeys, riddles, enchanted things, and terrifying foes, are used to convey cultural norms and moral ideals. Bilbo's change from a hobbit who liked to be comfortable to a morally responsible and brave person follows a common pattern in folklore in which identity is formed through trials and experiences. This change is important since it doesn't mean giving up on home or tradition; instead, it makes the importance of return stronger. The Shire is still the story's moral centre. It stands for an identity based on moderation, hospitality, and continuity that comes from the culture.From a cultural identification standpoint, Tolkien's oeuvre aligns with Benedict Anderson's notion of the "imagined community." Middle-earth is not real, but it is made up of enough language, history, and myth to be a plausible cultural entity. Songs, genealogies, and tales serve as internal cultural memory, enabling characters and readers to envision themselves within a collective history. Folklore serves as a cohesive story that integrates individuals into a shared identity rooted in tradition and locality.

But Tolkien's use of folklore is not without criticism. The story cautions again and over again about the consequences of having a possessive and exclusive identity. Thorin's desire to get Erebor back and hoard riches shows how cultural memory may turn into avarice and moral blindness. This conflict indicates that folklore may both validate identity and deform it when tradition becomes inflexible or dogmatic. In this way, Tolkien shows that folklore is morally strong but also morally demanding since it needs responsibility, humility, and balance.

Folklore as Diasporic Memory and Cultural Negotiation in Gaiman's American Gods, on the other hand, shows folklore as essentially unstable, broken apart, and depending on societal conditions. Gaiman's story shows a late-modern, postnational picture of the globe in which identity is no longer based on a single place or a particular culture. Folklore instead becomes a symbol for cultural movement, change, and loss.People remember and believe in the gods in American Gods, which is why they exist. This idea turns folklore into a kind of cultural capital: believing gives power, while forgetfulness takes it away. From this viewpoint, folklore is intrinsically linked to social activity. Myths must not just exist in literature; they must also be actively experienced, remembered, and ritualised. This closely matches Jan Assmann's idea of cultural memory, which says that a group's identity depends on people remembering things in certain social settings. Gaiman's portrayal of America as a realm of conflicting mythologies challenges the concept of a unified national identity. The novel doesn't have one main story; instead, it shows a marketplace of stories that have been formed by immigration, capitalism, and media culture. Old gods from Norse, African, Slavic, and Indigenous traditions live together in a tense way. Their strength has faded, which shows how immigrant identities have been absorbed and pushed to the edges. The rise of "new gods" in technology and media shows how contemporary belief systems replace old myths by not doing rid of them completely, but by changing where people focus their loyalty and attention.In this situation, folklore is more of

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a place to negotiate than a place to keep things safe. Characters stay alive by changing their names, adopting hybridity, and altering who they are. Gaiman's characters live in liminal locations like highways, hotels, and back alleys, which show how cultural membership is only temporary. This is different from Tolkien's anchored societies. Folklore no longer ensures stability; rather, it reveals fragility and transience.

The difference between Tolkien and Gaiman shows that there are two different ways of thinking about identity in fantasy fiction. Tolkien's folklore is centripetal; it draws identification inward towards coherence, continuity, and moral tradition. Gaiman's folklore is centrifugal because it spreads identity across several stories, focussing on hybridity, displacement, and cultural conflict.
These discrepancies are a result of the past. Tolkien works in response to what he saw as a loss of culture in early twentieth-century Europe. He tries to find meaning again by using legendary depth. Gaiman writes from a postmodern, globalised world where cultural identities are always changing and being fought over. Fantasy literature serves as a reflecting medium, transmuting historical fears into legendary representations.

Conclusion: This research has shown that folklore in fantasy literature is a strong way to express national and cultural identity. A comparative examination of The Hobbit and American Gods reveals that folklore not only preserves tradition but also actively reconfigures cultural meaning in response to historical and social transformations.
In The Hobbit, folklore supports a view of identity based on continuity, location, and shared moral principles. Tolkien's mythopoeic universe recognises the significance of cultural memory and inherited tradition, while also recognising the moral obligations that come with that memory. Folklore serves as a stabilising influence, providing a sense of kinship and historical depth in a contemporary world regarded as disjointed.American Gods, on the other hand, shows folklore as a sign of cultural displacement and hybridity. Gaiman's book reimagines myth as something that is alive yet fragile, held together by belief but easy to forget. Folklore serves as a metaphor for immigrant identity and cultural preservation in a multicultural society, necessitating the adaptation of tradition to avoid extinction.These works show how fantasy literature can deal with complicated issues of identity, memory, and power. Folklore is not a remnant of the past; rather, it is a dynamic cultural language through which civilisations navigate belonging and significance. The study indicates that further research might broaden this comparative paradigm to encompass postcolonial or non-Western imagination, so enhancing the understanding of folklore's functioning across many cultural settings.

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