

REDISCOVERING MYTHOLOGIES THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract

Ancient mythology is an integral part of human civilisation as these stories narrate the history of several millennia before the advent of formal historiography. Thereby ancient human life has been decoded through mythology and they became part of modern life through literature and media. Depictions of these mythologies and legends were portrayed followed by creative and unconventional adaptations. Thus these modern representations became instrumental in keeping mythology alive among the masses. This was an important endeavour as some of the world's most enthralling mythologies arise from important milestones of human civilisation such as the ancient Greeks, Romans, Egyptians and several other time periods making it important for our society to be well versed in the history of our own origin and the following anthropology.

This paper attempts to analyse how modern adaptations of mythologies in popular culture keep these myths alive in the present times. The research examines if these adaptations have presently gained more audience than the original narratives of these mythologies and how some of these adaptations have effectively subverted dominant ideologies and critiqued contemporary society. The study is conducted by taking examples from the Egyptian, Indian and Greek mythologies.

The study examines the history and the modern representations of ancient Egyptian, Indian and Greek Gods, heroes, legends and myths in various forms of popular culture such literature, movies, television series, art and music. Their acceptance and popularity among various age groups of the society is studied. It would also comment on classical and original texts forming a canon of their own which popular culture thereby subverts to an extent. Another subversion which the paper deals with is that of certain dominant norms of the society which some of these modern adaptations of myths has achieved. Powerful characters from historical legends and myths are brought forth to critique the contemporary society which claims to be progressive. Therefore this study aims at an evaluation of the modern representations and revival of ancient myths and legends through popular culture along with their impacts on the modern society.

Keywords

mythology, Greek, Egyptian, Indian, modern representations

Introduction

In the beginning in a dark void was a black winged bird, Nyx and for ages together she sat on a golden egg she had laid with the wind. From the egg emerged Eros, the God of love and the two halves of the shell became the sky and the earth. The sky was named Uranus and the earth Gaia and Eros made them fall in love. They had children and grandchildren among whom were Kronos and Zeus. Zeus is said to have furnished

Gaia with life and Uranus with stars. His sons Prometheus created men in the image of the Gods and Epimetheus created the animals. This was the Greek myth of creation.

In the beginning there was nothing but the waters of Nu from which emerged the first pyramid with Atum also known as The Great He-She as he is believed to have created the first children by auto-eroticism thereby embracing an androgynous nature of existence. This was a prominent Egyptian creation myth.

Out of was nothing God created The Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve and all of his creations in six days. And on the seventh day God rested. The creation of man in God's image believed by the Christian community today arises from this Abrahamic myth of creation.

Here we see three unique creation myths emerging from different time periods during which flourished different strands of humanity whose history and culture is reflected in the myths and legends of the time. Their stories and beliefs are made immortal through the dissemination of these myths. With civilisations dying out their legacies were also forgotten but historians deciphered ancient scripts and artefacts to create written history and portray this history through museums and archeological departments. These stories slowly became part of the modern civilisation as well. Since these mythologies arising from different times and different parts of the world are histories, cultures and beliefs of the people who came before us it is imperative to understand them to have a wholesome existence in the present world. With movies capturing these stories in vivid detail and books experimenting with representations and perspectives ancient mythology through popular culture has reached the audience with a break from traditional narratives. In contemporary authors and artists doing so, they have kept several of these myths otherwise confined to large, dusty volumes from being forgotten. But the concern of these narratives overshadowing the originals and the extent of this issue is to be discussed. These modern adaptations also critique the contemporary society and subvert several existing norms. These are the three main tangents of discussion in this paper.

Theoretical framework

The paper mainly deals with mythology, legends and its evolution over the course of time in relation with the society. The textual analysis utilises several theories to examine how modern depictions of mythological characters could affect the society. There are several post modernist theories that can be applied in understanding how these modern representations operate. Instances of intertextuality can be identified in almost all the texts addressed in the paper where events from the modern works are to be understood in the light of certain ideas from the original myths. This interconnection will in turn help to gauge the response of the audience to these representations.

Julia Kristeva believed that texts are created out of intertextuality and her work in the field is vast. She defines the geno-text and the pheno-text in correlation with the idea of the palimpsest. Palimpsest being the practice of erasing an old text to accommodate a new one on the same surface, Kristeva describes geno-text as the original text which eventually makes space for the emergence of the new text which she identifies as the pheno-text. This idea is fundamental in understanding and critiquing the extent to which modern representations of myths are affecting the importance and relevance of the originals myths.

Following this is pastiche which describes how some of these works are created by referring to previous works in their content and style with the intention of celebrating these myths while bringing out modern representations of the old myths as well. Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction is also relevant in identifying underlying themes and ideas in the texts to engage with possible counter ideologies which could refute the overt claims of the content as well as the dominant notions of the time. Dealing with existing myths using different views, styles and perspectives also falls under the purview of these strands of analysis. There are dominant ideas from feminist and gender theories also which are drawn to analyse how modern representations of mythological characters critique, refute or subvert dominant ideologies in relation to gender stereotypes and other prominent issues in the contemporary society.

Review of Literature

Several essays and papers have been written on the subject of mythology and the following are a few of those works. The essay by Maurice Saxby "Myth and Legend" defines mythologies and legends and their numerous strands while tracing their history. Myths dealt more with stories about natural phenomena, culture and the general lives of the community it arises from; whereas legends focus on the lives of certain individuals glorifying their existence. These may form a part of a larger myth and might also have historical backing which isolated myths often lack. This essay examines how these myths operate within the society influencing contemporary trends and defining established tropes in the literary and visual media. It highlights the impact of early spiritual legends such as that of Joan of Arc and epics like The Mahabharata which gave rise to the archetypes of the superheroes and the perfect men and women depicted in the mainstream media and literature. This is a main strand of discussion in the paper under modern and unconventional representations of these mythological characters be it positive or negative. These adaptations are pivotal in understanding the revival of these myths and legends while taking into consideration the response of the audience as well. It also brings in the point of view and involvement of the publishing domain in the process of retelling and reshaping these myths and legends.

"The Influence of Mythology on Literature and Society" is an essay put up anonymously that mainly deals with ancient mythologies and how they impact the modern world and literature. This is an important element discussed in the paper. It also provides us with the basic understanding of what exactly mythology is and how it came to be. Classical mythology is said to be accounts of ancient communities and their stories of how they understood the human race and the earth at that time. We are able to draw anthropological evidences from these mythologies as they are milestones in the history of human civilisation. These ancient characters were constructed with raw honesty that they became archetypes depicted in various forms and contexts in the literature which emerged later. Thus they became an intrinsic part of the literary world and society and will remain so until literature survives.

"Egyptian Myths and Legends" is another anonymous essay from the same domain which functions as an important source of information on the plethora of Egyptian gods and goddesses which form their mythology. Starting from Ra the supreme God who is the symbol of the sun to Anubis who is the God of the dead, their gods, deities, legends and stories are explained in the essay in great detail. This essay shows how rich and

potent Egyptian culture and mythology is and it also functions as a point of reference to compare and analyse the various versions and adaptations of the gods which appear in modern literature.

“Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre” is a journal article by Edith Hall. This article deals with a similar idea as this paper where it situates the influences of classical mythology in Victorian times in the context of the social hierarchy and class structure of theatre as a social institution of the time. This paper attempts to do a similar analysis with respect to mythological characters and their representations in the popular culture of the present times in the context of social acceptance, popularity and their impact on societal norms.

The online article “Egyptian Influence in Popular Culture” from the website *Revolvy* provides a lot of information which is conveniently categorised with each of the Egyptian gods and goddesses mentioned along with their modern depictions in popular culture. Several examples mentioned in the paper are taken from this source as it provides details even about the most obscure deities of Egyptian mythology.

Another essay from a free public domain which deals with the topic is “Literary Elements of *The Red Pyramid* by Rick Riordan”. This book is part of *The Kane Chronicles* series revolving around the lives of two siblings, Carter and Sadie Kane who became involved in a lot of encounters and missions with Egyptian gods and goddesses. Apart from being young adult fiction, these books familiarise the youth with ancient Egyptian mythology and legends which becomes a crucial function. The children in the book are situated in the modern world and the book captures several Egyptian characters in their immortal forms, depictions of humans who seem to have imbibed the characteristics of these gods and goddesses and also their incarnations and rebirths in the modern world. Such examples of creative and contemporary depictions are used in the paper to analyse their role in the subversion of dominant traits and norms of the society.

Books

The Kane Chronicles have plot lines which extensively deal with ancient Egyptian myths and legends. It contains several examples of modern representations which defy conventions and also familiarise the readers with the intricacies of Egyptian mythology in great detail. Michelle Moran is another author who has dealt extensively with female historical and mythological figures of ancient Egypt. Her books like *Nefertiti*, *The Heretic Queen* and *Cleopatra's Daughter* are examples of modern adaptations of these women which make a strong statement in the present society. Another noteworthy book is *Gods Behaving Badly* by Marie Phillips. This book contains modern and unconventional depictions of Greek characters infused within a humorous plot. While these characters are depicted in an extremely different light the writer also does justice to ensure that the narrative retains the aura of the original characters. These representations often function to subvert some of the assumptions harboured against these characters as well as similar contexts and ideologies identified in the present society. Kaitlin Bevis is an author who has specialised in retelling classic Greek epics in a contemporary light. Her books deal with the goddesses Persephone, Aphrodite and others. They are situated in the human world while having an equally active presence in the mythological sphere too. Similarly Kara Cooney's books like *When Women Ruled The World* and *The Woman Who Would Be King* also portrayed modern historical adaptations of ancient Egyptian figures who made a difference in the past and

brought them back to emphasise their ideologies and bring about a difference in the present society through literature. Cooney is an Egyptologist and an associate professor of Egyptian Art and Architecture at UCLA. Therefore her expertise in the field is commendable. These books effectively keep the readers who emerge from a wide age range well informed and interested in this field which is of utmost importance given the status and reputation of Egyptian history in the story of mankind. There are also several books such as Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy that deal with contemporary representations of ancient Indian mythology. According to "Shiva for all times: A Study of Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha*" which is a research article by Ritika Paul, this trilogy recasts the Shiva myth as a metaphor to critique the contemporary society.

Movies and other visual media

There are also several movies which are period dramas capturing these myths, legends and stories. Among them are *Gods of Egypt*, *Troy*, *Hercules*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and such other movies with a historical angle to it portraying the lives of legends such as the Egyptian gods, Achilles, Hercules, Queen Cleopatra and Mark Antony respectively. There are also several other movies which take in elements of these mythologies and give it a contemporary twist. Movies like *The Clash of the Titans*, *Wrath of the Titans*, *The Percy Jackson series* and *Wonder Woman* are movies which depict the stories and characters of Greek mythology such as the Titans, Percy the son of Poseidon and the Amazons respectively tracing their legends in an innovative manner. *The Mummy series* depict adaptations of characters like Imhotep and Ahmanet along with Egyptian mythological elements such as the ancient practice of mummification. *Stargate* movies and the television series have modern adaptations on the theories of pyramids, Goa'uld characters depicting Egyptian Gods and characters. *Black Panther* is yet another movie that has Heliopolitans and Bast as the patron deity of Wakanda thereby bringing about a modern twist to the myths and legends. One of the striking movies in the list is *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* This movie includes several elements of Greek and Roman mythology like the heroes, the villains, the sirens and other characters. They are depicted in an entirely new light. Classical mythology is depicted here by infusing humour and contemporary twists to the characters but yet remaining honest to the original framework of the characters. *Hercules* is a yet another movie which is an animated one portraying a modern representation of the Greek hero Hercules. The villains and the supporting characters are given a twist in this depiction while retaining the defining features of the characters. Indian myths have always had a platform in the visual sphere in the form of serials, movies or short films and this paper will be dealing with several of those traditional and contemporary representations.

The scope of the study

Researches have been done in the field of mythologies and legends but the number of papers focusing on the contemporary adaptations and their effects on the society are not many. Most of the studies focus on how a single work has reimagined a particular myth and not on how these unconventional representations subvert dominant notions and canons. Therefore this paper would attempt to identify different, unexplored tangents of research and shed light on these influential and modern depictions of myths perpetuated through popular culture. The possible limitations of the study would be the failure to mention probable significant examples in

certain sections which are in some ways overcome by mentions of other equally relevant ones. There could also be a disagreement in the idea of subversion of canons established by the survey conducted, despite attempting to collect data from varied sample spaces using specific methods to ensure an unbiased analysis.

Methodology

This paper aims to analyse the modern representations of ancient Egyptian, Indian and Greek mythologies in the present day popular culture and initially gauge the acceptance and popularity of these forms over the original texts of these myths. It also attempts to examine how these contemporary adaptations have critiqued and subverted social norms. Therefore the study mainly addresses the following questions-

- Has the modern depictions of mythology and legends gained more popularity than the original texts?
- If so will the acceptance of one lead to the disintegration of the privileges of the canon in the case of classical mythology?
- Is this acceptance of popular culture over the canon an issue or a refreshing change that the literary world has to embrace to widen horizons?
- How differently are the characteristics of the original myths and legends depicted in their modern adaptations?
- How are these depictions subverting or critiquing existing societal norms? How much have they succeeded in this venture?
- Were these modern representations able to do justice to the original characters without losing their essence?
- How effectively are these popular culture depictions keeping the community informed about mythologies and legends?
- What are the other impacts of these modern representations on the society?

This research utilised a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct the study. Initially opinion polls, surveys and questionnaires were used to analyse the acceptance of contemporary depictions of mythology among the people. Different means were used to gather inputs from different sections of the society like social media used to generate data from the teenagers, young adults and youth while questionnaires and online survey forms were used to reach out to the adults and seniors of the community. Taking opinions from a nominal number of people from each category and combining them will lead to the formation of an impartial set of data. Thereby an unbiased opinion poll can be generated to understand which kind of literature is preferred in the case of mythologies — the original texts and accounts or modern depictions of these myths. The rest of the research will follow a qualitative method as it analyses the various ways in which mythological characters are depicted in popular culture through close reading and textual analysis. It will examine how the characteristics of certain figures are appropriated in unconventional and creative frameworks to effectively portray the myths in an innovative manner without losing their essence. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis, the study will also inspect how these modern adaptations work towards subverting certain societal norms, critiquing contemporary issues and bringing about a positive change in the

community. It will take movies, television shows, books, websites, documentaries, articles, social media and several other platforms into consideration to examine these trends and thereby ensure a thorough study of the subject.

Analysis

Numerous retellings of old myths and legends have earned their place in popular culture and contemporary fiction. As mentioned previously, movies like *The Gods of Egypt*, *Hercules* or Indian television dramas like *Mahabharat* celebrate these myths keeping them alive among the contemporary audience. In addition to this there are other texts which were inspired by the myths and artists added their own perspectives to them. In doing so they presented the existing myth along with a retelling of the same in new light using unconventional forms.

Retelling ancient myths through the visual media

Katy Perry's music video of the song "Dark Horse" is an example of how ancient Egyptian myths and legends were appropriated to create new meanings and perspectives. The song depicts the Queen Cleopatra in a modern light. The name of the song in itself suggests an unexpected competitor who rises to victory which is not far from the history of Cleopatra and she could be seen as a metaphor symbolising women and their secondary status in the society. Analysed under a feminist angle, in the music video she rises even above the glory she gained just for her beauty and focuses on her prize to gain and learn from men, but never to be under their influence or power. Thereby she attained total independence and power over men. This could serve as an inspiration to young girls who are the main consumers of pop music to embrace their womanhood and not be ashamed and judgemental of the femme fatale characters who are part of their legacy of being a woman.

Wonder Woman is yet another movie which has a modern adaptation of the Amazons from Greek mythology. Set during the First World War which portrayed a natural state of affairs in a society where women do not need to fight for their stand, women are seen as equals or superiors to men in areas which are traditionally reserved for men such as war, politics, freedom of movement and expression retrained by clothes, laws and norms, all subverted by the protagonist Diana.

The movies inspired from the *Percy Jackson* book series portray a modern depiction of the satyrs from the Greek mythology. Grover is the satyr in the books and he is shown to be a boy who walks with a limp but yet is successful in his adventures with Percy. This representation subverts the general stigma surrounding disability and it does not stop him from any of his endeavours. As a part of books and movies consumed by children and young adults, such powerful representations will uplift the marginalised disabled community and address the stigma associated with them.

A recent short film by Akshat Verma, *MAMA's Boys* is a modern retelling of an instance from The Mahabharata. It portrays the character of Draupadi in a very different light which has dual implications. This modern take on Draupadi being happy about being shared between five different men can be seen as a gross aberration from the original myth. But it can also be seen as a new perspective on the modern woman who is capable of adapting to any situation. It also celebrates the emergence of a new woman from the stereotypical

ideal, who flirts, seduces and embraces her womanhood; be it in the form of treating herself with lingerie or allowing her to explore her sensual femininity.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? is a movie which is a thought provoking, modern take on Homer's Odyssey with the Ulysses and the other main characters functioning as representations of archetypes such as a proud leader, loyal comrade, villain, gullible and sensitive, Sirens as seductresses and Penny symbolising abandoned wives. The characters are depicted in a humorous light but keeping their original essence. This movie brings to attention the mundane human characteristics of heroic figures suggesting that heroism lies within every ordinary man.

Modern representations of myths in literature

Medusa is a character from Greek mythology which is recurring in modern literature and often misrepresented. Helene Cixous in her manifesto *The Laugh of the Medusa* spoke of the importance of women writing in the face of every obstacle and suppression they may face. According to her the monstrous legacy of Medusa was perpetuated by the collective fear of female desire and that women writing is the means to deconstruct the sexist portrayal of the female body as a threat. In the light of the history of Medusa's rape by Poseidon, open conversations about rape without targeting the victim in the present times has in a way given back Medusa's voice and avenged her struggles. Therefore Medusa has survived as an icon of female strength provoking misogyny in all forms contorting this image. According to Elizabeth Johnston's essay, "The Original 'Nasty Woman'" strong women leaders such as Theresa May, Angela Merkel and Hilary Clinton (with a Perseus-Trump) have had their heads superimposed on the figure of Medusa demeaning female authority and suggesting that they are unnecessary voices that need to be silenced. (Hastings) Such derogatory imagery managed to enter the mainstream due to its wide portrayal and acceptance in the popular culture though several movies and books such as the Percy Jackson series, *Clash of the Titans* etc. Thus in the contemporary society this mythical woman remains as a symbol of retaliation against misogynistic elements.

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a book which reimagines the Mahabharata from the perspective of Panchaali starting from her birth, capturing all the prominent events of the myth through her eyes. The narrative celebrates the sensuous femininity of the protagonist in an otherwise male dominated mythology and this new perspective brings out overlooked instances of patriarchy and downplayed characters. It also makes comments on the present war-torn world. As Chimamanda Adichie spoke of the dangers of a single story, this modern adaptation of Mahabharata subverts the grand narrative and brings forth new perspectives to understanding the myth when the lady of the story is made subject.

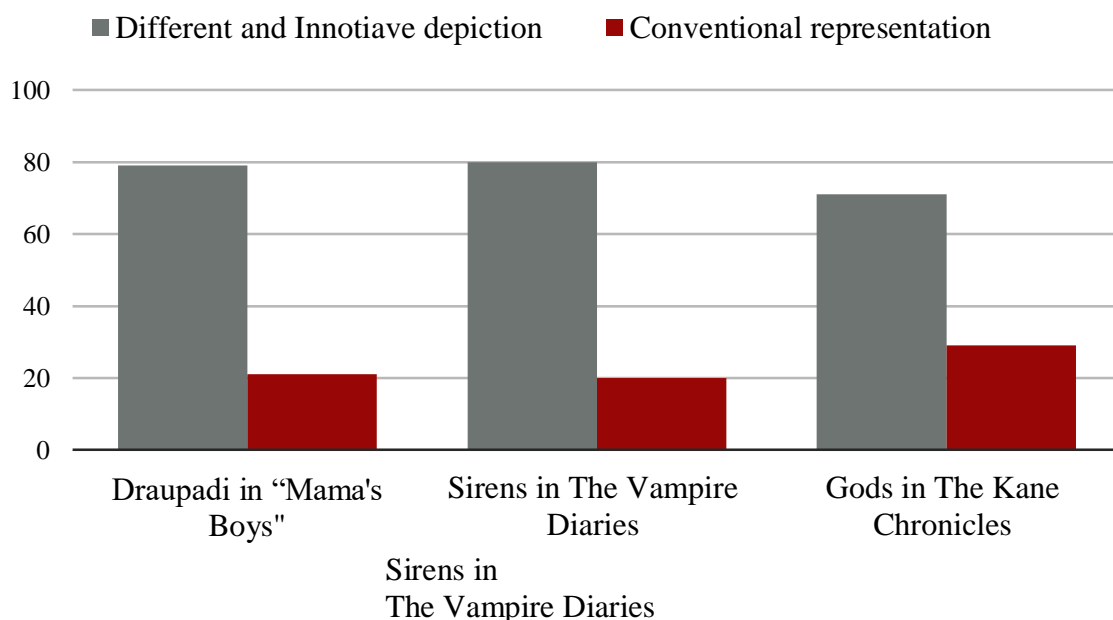
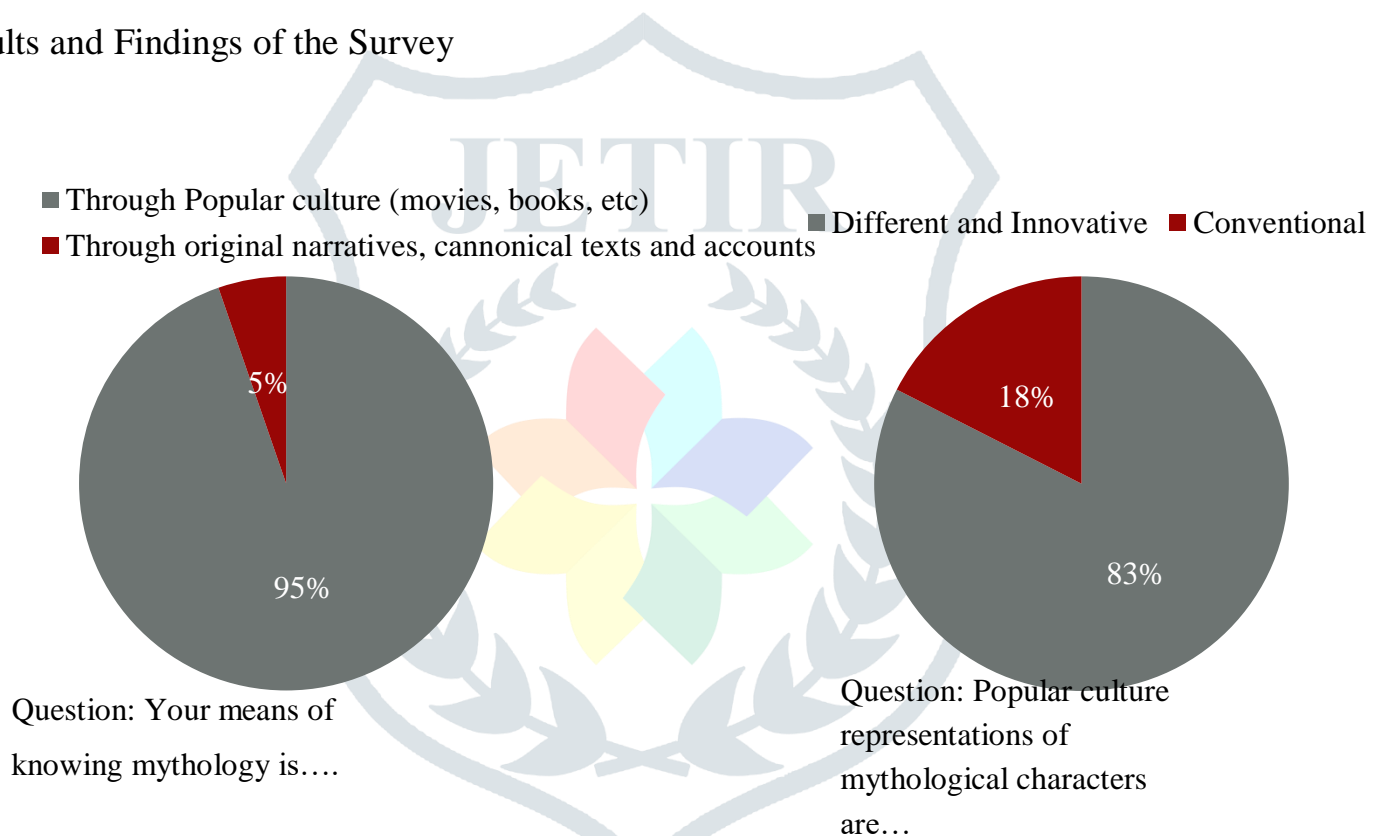
The Shiva Trilogy by Amish Tripathi portrayed Lord Shiva in a new light ascribing human flaws and traits to his divine personality. The divinity element of the myth was the not the only one explored. The myth is reimagined to critique the present degradation in the society with respect to violence, environmental exploitation, corruption and other social predicaments.

Marie Philips wrote the book *Gods Behaving Badly* which was a humorous take on Greek gods reimagined to be alive and living in contemporary London. The characters get into trouble that is only possible owing to their divine elements. It subverts the seriousness of classical Greek mythology outrageously

as the specific traits of the gods are humanised where Aphrodite, the goddess of love works as a phone-sex operator whereas Dionysus, the god of wine runs a bar. Matters of mythical sexual abuse and incest are treated with callousness. It undermines the supremacy of the canon in perpetuating myths as books like these capture the essence of the characters and the myth in unconventional ways while not compromising on the defining features.

The book *When Women Ruled the World* by Kara Cooney explores the history of six female rulers and how female leadership was an accepted concept by the ancient civilisation. But however women in power in the present society are being judged and criticised while others are refrained by the male dominated society to rise out of their imposed positions as pawns to men. Thereby this book which deals with Egyptian history and myth juxtaposes these ideas in the contemporary times to critique sexism in the present society.

Results and Findings of the Survey



Not everyone today reads *The Ramayana* daily as was the custom in the olden days to know and understand the mythology. The same can be said about *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as well as hieroglyphics or the thick research volumes of Egyptian mythology. Therefore modern retellings of these myths in modern forms are being consumed. The acceptance of these modern narratives and the variations from the original narratives were gauged in the survey conducted.

The survey measured the sources from which people got to know their mythology from and the results were in favour of popular culture representations and the view of the respondents about these modern representations were also found to be positive along the lines of being 'good different'. For this next part of the survey the characterisation of Draupadi from the Mahabharata mythology, the Sirens from the Greek mythology and the Gods of Egyptian mythology were analysed in their modern representations of *MAMA's Boys*, a short film by Akshat Verma; *The Vampire Diaries*, a television series created by Julie Plec and Kevin Williamson; and *The Kane Chronicles*, a book series by Rick Riordan respectively. And in each of the cases the percentage of opinions which stated them to be different and innovative ranked higher than those which suggested that they were conventional representations. All the statistics provided are in the form of percentages.

Through the survey it was evident that popular representations have a wider audience and that the innovative depictions of traditional myths and characters are seen as positive and creative ventures to explore new perspectives of the mythologies.

Conclusion

From these original narratives and their modern adaptations developed Mythopoeic fiction which mainly creates narratives resembling the style and structure of ancient myths and legends but are purely fictional. Such novel endeavours keep the legacy of mythology and its importance alive among the readers. Similarly modern adaptations of mythology and legends have kept the current audience interested and aware about them and thereby preserving these stories. Popular culture and its consumption by the audience has always been a threat to 'high art' and the canon. But these representations have brought out new and unexplored areas of these mythologies to light. In the interest of research and conscious engagement with the text, this is a critical function of popular culture narratives of mythologies. Through numerous examples it has also been established that these modern representations of mythological characters have effectively subverted dominant ideologies and critiqued the contemporary society by reimagining the myths from a new perspective. Therefore it is imperative in the evolving field of literature to be open to experimental narratives which challenge the present notions as they could one day be hailed as a possible revolutionary milestone in the long legacy of language and literature.

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