

## **DRIBBLING WITH GODS: RE-AVATARIZATION AND ASSIMILATION OF DIVINE FIGURES IN NEIL GAIMAN'S AMERICAN GODS AND KEVIN HEARNE'S IRON DRUID CHRONICLES**

**JYOTI MISHRA**

Department of English, RBVRR Women's College, Hyderabad, Telangana, India

### **ABSTRACT**

When people migrate from one land to another, they take with them their culture, their traditions and their religion, which demarcates them as the 'other' and at the same time is the marker of their identity. But what happens to the Gods in the foreign land? Do they transmute from spiritual and religious figures to cultural symbols and then finally merges into popular culture to their death and eventual 're-avaterization'? I use the term 're-avaterization' to signify the re-imagination of ancient accepted views of certain ideas, in this case, the idea of Gods with all its associated power and omniscience to something created out of human imagination more connected to current times. Neil Gaiman's American Gods talks about the migration of these Gods with their people into the 'new land' America where they either became lost as their followers dwindled and lost belief, or became transmuted into other avatars due to their re-imagination by the people. Kevin Hearne's Iron Druid series introduces many such Gods, Gods lost from memory and ones still remembered, from all over the world. Terry Pratchett in his Discworld series talks about the power of belief which sustains and gives power to certain entities to be Gods. What I am interested is in the re-imagination of Gods from powerful religious and symbolic figures to popular icons through their dissemination in literature, notably fantasy fiction.

Gaiman and Hearne have taken Gods from various cultures and pantheons and in this article I would like to map their transmutation and re-imagination in popular culture.

As an offshoot, I would also like to analyse this similar transformation with regard to the Hindu Gods from India. It seems to me that with Hinduism, the philosophical, the spiritual and the didactic aspect has been popular for some time with our global export of so called "Indian spirituality" at the hands of myriad spiritual gurus. But with regard to Hindu Gods, there are different politics at play. The portrayal of Hindu Gods in Gaiman and Hearne's books for instance is fascinating as it gives off vibes of the 'Exotic Orient' from the point of view of the 'West'. There are many subtle variations in their depiction which I would like to ponder over with all its resultant implications and politics.

I believe that through this study we can get an idea of subtle cultural processes at work that assimilates elements of one culture into another while preserving its sense of the 'other' and the 'exotic' but sanitizing it to an acceptable level for the dominant host culture. It seems to me that it is important to maintain this duality to attract people to its exotic allure and at the same time to tone down its essential 'alienness' so as to not detract the audience. Because of the settings of both Gaiman and Hearne's books, the US has become the fantastical grounds where I will be analysing this process of assimilation and re-avaterization of various Gods from around the world and from America itself, that is the Native American Gods. What does it all signify? Does it indicate the elevation of religious figures and the importance of religion

or does it signify a kind of death by their transmutation into pop icons? These are few of the questions that I would like to use as my analytical framework as I seek to interrogate the process of cultural migration over time.

**KEYWORDS:** Gods, Popular Culture, Migration, Cultural Appropriation

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of my research as I look into divine figures and their transformation and transmutation as they move from strictly religious and spiritual spheres into the realm of fiction and popular culture.

Migration of different communities across borders and nations has been a phenomenon since civilization started. Be it the arrival of Angles and Saxons to Britain, the Aryans to the Indian sub-continent or the English, Irish, German, Italian, Spanish, Chinese et.al. to the “New World” of America. When people migrate from one land to another, they take with them their culture, their traditions and their religion, which in my opinion demarcates them as the ‘other’ and at the same time is the marker of their identity. As the ushistory.org websites says, due to migration “New complexions, new languages, and new religions confronted the already diverse American mosaic”.

What I am interested in is the migration of religion along with the geographical re-location of the migrant communities and the re-imagination of their Gods from powerful religious and symbolic figures to popular icons through their dissemination in literature. My focus is on the “re-avaterization” of the divine figures associated with myriad religions as they cross oceans and mountains and are exposed to other land, cultures and religious set ups. This contact between migrant communities and the host culture or among multiple migrant communities in a new land leads to fascinating cultural changes. For instance Wendy Cadge and Elaine Howard Ecklund in their article “Immigration and Religion” have mapped the studies done on religion in the life of post-1965 immigrants to United States of America and have noted studies done on religion and the formation of ethnic and gender identity. One study which I found interesting in the context of migrant culture coming in contact with the host culture in terms of religion was a study on immigrant Chinese and their conversion to Christianity. Cadge and Ecklund note:

The work of some authors also reflects the theme that agency is an important part of creating religious identities (Ng 2002; Yang 1999a,b). For example, on the basis of evidence of the conversion process for members of a Chinese immigrant church, Ng (2002) argues that the process of converting to a mainstream religion in the United States involves Chinese immigrants’ developing their own appropriations of cultural categories, symbols, and practices even though they are converting to Christianity, an institutionally accepted religion in the United States. And in his work, Yang (1999b, 2000a) shows through ethnographic research among Chinese immigrant churches that religious and ethnic identities are not an either/or matter of assimilation or cultural retention. Rather, identities for Chinese are best described as adhesive, allowing for both selective assimilation and selective preservation of ethnicity in the process of negotiating what it means to be Christian, American, and Chinese. (Emphasis Added 364)

This idea of selective assimilation and selective retention of cultural traditions and ethnicity was what I wanted to highlight as a phenomenon in relation to migrant communities and their contact with the host culture or any other dominant migrant culture. This observation holds true with regard to the handling of divine figures in Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* and Kevin Hearne’s *Iron Druid Chronicles*. The work of both these writers reference divine and mythological figures from various religions and communities, some long forgotten, some still existing in the present. Combining their popularity and

the sheer range of their storytelling and handling of important religious and mythological figures, have made me choose them as texts for my study, discarding many other fantasy texts which in my opinion did not have the range and diversity of these two.

Now it is implied here that the “re-avatarization” is a cultural process which occurs over a span of time and is visible in literature, performing and visual art, movies, mass media etc. With regard to the subject at hand, one of the processes is through their dissemination in literature where artistic license automatically means re-invention and re-imagination of the concerned deities. This handling in my opinion triggers the process of ‘re-avatarization’ as a new idea regarding these divine figures is circulated in society after the publication of the book which may end up in popular imagination and culture and undergo further change. This process can be seen with the publication of Gaiman and Hearne’s books for instance where they have re-imagined divine figures from various religious communities and presented them for our consumption.

Neil Gaiman’s central idea in his novel *American Gods* is that when people migrated to America from all over the world taking with them their culture, traditions and religion, the Gods travelled with their people into the ‘new land’ America where they either lost power over time as their followers dwindled and lost belief, or became transmuted into other avatars due to their re-imagination by the people. I see this struggle for survival of the Gods---to be remembered and worshipped by their devotees in a new land and thus retain power---as a metaphor for the survival of the religion itself in the migrant culture as they try to adjust to a new place. It represents in my opinion the metaphorical religious struggles of the people themselves, whether to embrace new gods and religion to assimilate faster with the host culture or retain their own and thus always be the ‘other’.

There is another way of looking at the question of migration and cultural assimilation. I would like to propose an alternative to geographical migration and the resultant cultural process of conflict and assimilation. That is the simple migration of ideas and distinct cultural traditions and mythologies across spatial territories due to the developments in the field of information technology, increased reach of mass media and the ease of retrieving information from the internet. With the entire world connected and information about different religions, cultures, legends and mythologies available at the tips of our fingers, it is an easy step to access it and represent it in fiction and art. This framework in my opinion is more apt when studying Kevin Hearne’s *Iron Druid Chronicles* as he brings in divine figures and supernatural creatures from all over the world to populate his wildly successful books. Use of exotic legends, mythologies and stories has been a staple of fantasy fiction since its inception. Be it the Arthurian legends, Greek, Roman, Celtic, Norse or Far- Eastern mythology or the extended Biblical universe, it has been fair game for fantasy writers to select characters, plot points, story lines or set the back universe from any mythology of their choosing. The list is too huge to mention as for the past 200 years there has been a continued publication of fantasy books. But what interests me the most is how the writer uses this material, what changes he undertakes and what he retains, and the final product with all its implications. For the purpose of my study I am focusing on the transformation and representation of divine figures and their respective pantheons as I have noticed a pattern of ‘re-avatarization.’ I use the term ‘re-avatarization’ to signify the re-imagination of ancient accepted views of certain ideas, in this case, the idea of Gods with all its associated power and omniscience to something created out of human imagination more connected to current times. There is a certain stripping of awe and faith-inspiring wonder in the handling of divine figures from the numerous pantheons that are Gaiman and Hearne’s source material. They have been

humanized in my opinion with very human like characteristics juxtaposed with an ego of “God-like” proportions. Religious and spiritual fervour is missing in favour of handling them simply as characters in a fictional universe who happen to be inspired from real life Gods in the real world. In my opinion and as I will display in this study, they become cultural symbols representative of a particular community and their religious practices from a certain period, it can be in the past or still continuing in the present. This process is what I term as ‘re-avatarization’

## THE MIGRATION OF GODS

Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* (2001) is an award winning work set in the United States of America and referencing divine figures from several ancient pantheons and cultures. If we look at the characters of the novels, the protagonist is Shadow-Moon who is revealed to be a re-incarnation of Baldr, the Norse God of Light, in Gaiman’s short story “The Monarch of the Glen;” Mr. Wednesday and Low-Key Lyesmith, being avatars of the Norse Gods Odin and Loki respectively; Mr. Nancy, being an avatar of Anansi, a trickster figure in African folklore; Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jaquel, both avatars of Thoth and Anubis from the ancient Egyptian religion; Easter representing Eostre the ancient pagan Germanic Goddess of the Dawn; Czernobog, also spelled as Chernobog, an old pagan Slavic deity; Mama-ji representing Goddess Kali of the Hindus, Whiskey Jack as Wisakedjak, a trickster deity of the Native American Algonquoin people and many non-divine characters and at the same time part of old legends and mythologies like Bilquis, an avatar of Queen of Sheba from the Biblical universe, and John Chapman as Johnny Appleseed who is now a part of American legends. Now I say these characters are avatars of the mentioned Gods, because they are not the original Gods themselves, but a form or avatar of them manifested in America by the prayers of their followers who had migrated from their homelands to a new land and had brought their culture and religion with them, thus invoking the Gods whom they worshipped in their native lands. As we see in the novel, Mr. Wednesday, an avatar of Odin in America dies at the end but at the same time Shadow meets another version or avatar of Odin in Iceland after the main events of the book. Shadow accuses the Icelandic avatar of Odin of Wednesday’s greedy actions-“Wednesday did. He was you.”(1046); to which Odin replies, “He was me, yes. But I am not him.”(1046). So the death or loss of the American version of the Gods does not entail the death of its original manifestation or even death of the idea of the God itself.

Now, if we look at the people and community that these divine figures used to be Gods of for instance the Norse, the Slavs, people of Germanic, Chinese, Japanese, Egyptian or African descent, they have all migrated to America. The only exceptions are the Native American tribes. (ushistory.org). But what is significant is the timeframe of the immigration of these races to America as depicted in *American Gods*. They are not new immigrants with first, second or third generation families, but they have lived in America long enough to integrate into the larger American culture and also contribute to the formation of said culture. (ushistory.org)

However, as time flew, these immigrant communities slowly assimilated into the new American system and their old religions and deities were forgotten as seen in *American Gods*. Such is not a case with the newer batch of immigrants however. As Wendy Cadge and Elaine Howard Ecklund, note in their essay “Immigration and Religion”:

Some scholars have suggested that *religious identities become more salient for immigrants in the United States than in their nations of origin because of the role religions have in preserving ethnic identities*, although there is only indirect evidence for this...Immigrants may use religion as part of identity construction in multiple ways. Religion can be used primarily to construct a religious identity, to facilitate development or retention of an ethnic identity, or some

combination of these depending on the context or ethnic resources of a particular religious gathering. Most of the current religion and immigration literature focuses on the ways immigrant religious organizations help to reinforce and maintain ethnicity (Ebaugh & Chafetz 2000b, Warner & Wittner 1998)...In the few studies that do examine how religious and ethnic identities relate to one another outside of specifically religious contexts, scholars of religion and immigration show that a religious identity may be manifest differently based on social and historical contexts and that religious identities may *change over time as immigrants and their children adapt to different facets of U.S. culture.* (Emphasis Added 363-365)

The findings presented in the above quotation are significant as it not only posits the use of religion as part of immigrant identity construction by interlacing it with ethnicity but also the fact that “religious identities may change over time as immigrants and their children adapt to different facets of U.S. culture” thus pointing out an active process of cultural assimilation and retention in relation to the dominant culture.

Terry Pratchett in his *Discworld* series talks about the power of belief which sustains and gives power to certain entities to be Gods which is echoed in *American Gods* and in its presentation of various ancient and new age Gods.

Koomi's theory was that gods come into being and grow and flourish because they are believed in. *Belief itself is the food of the gods.* Initially, when mankind lived in small primitive tribes, there were probably millions of gods. Now there tended to be only a few very important ones-local gods of thunder and love, for example, tended to run together like pools of mercury as the small primitive tribes joined up and became huge, powerful primitive tribes with more sophisticated weapons. But any god could join. Any god could start small. Any god could grow in stature as its believers increased. And dwindle as they decreased. It was like a great big game of ladders and snakes. (Emphasis Added Small Gods 163).

As noted above, the power of Gods increase as their believers increased and vice versa. This is significant within the context of *American Gods* because all the Old Gods mentioned in the novel have lost power because the number of their believers has gone down.

"When the people came to America they brought us with them. They brought me, and Loki and Thor, Anansi and the Lion-God, Leprechauns and Kobolds and Banshees, Kubera and Frau Holle and Ashtaroth, and they brought you. We rode here in their minds, and we took root. We traveled with the settlers to the new lands across the ocean.

"The land is vast. Soon enough, our people abandoned us, remembered us only as creatures of the old land, as things that had not come with them to the new. Our true believers passed on, or stopped believing, and we were left, lost and scared and dispossessed, only what little smidgens of worship or belief we could find. And to get by as best we could. (240)

Geography is another essential element in this formulation. This is a book about the clash of forgotten old Gods and the new age Gods created in U.S.A by its obsession with technology, media, capitalism and market forces and the internet on American soil. It is in U.S.A that they have lost followers while in other parts of the world or in the original country of their inception, they might be stronger. I see the apparent power or lack of power of the Gods as a metaphor of the popularity of the concerned religion in a certain geographical location or among a community. As has been mentioned with the avatar of Odin whom Shadow meets in Iceland, or reference by the Hindu Goddess Kali of her alternate avatar in India, who says, “Some of us do better than others, I agree. I do well. Back in India, there is an incarnation of me who does

much better, but so be it.” (*American Gods* 244); the power of these Gods has a relation to geography too. Even in reference to Christianity which is a thriving religion in U.S.A., Mr. Ibis, an avatar of the ancient Egyptian God Thoth comments to Shadow:

“That’s good,” said Jacquel. “So, yeah, Jesus does pretty good over here. But I met a guy who said he saw him hitchhiking by the side of the road in Afghanistan and nobody was stopping to give him a ride. You know? It all depends on where you are.” (Emphasis Added 370)

The above excerpt clearly references the spread and popularity of Christianity in certain parts of the world and its nascent presence in others. This I feel justifies my metaphor of comparing the power of the God appearing in the novel to the popularity or struggle for survival of the religion itself among its practitioners. Mr. Ibis also points to the pattern of migration across the world, when ancient civilizations traded with each other subtly subverting the White Imperialist idea of “discovering” a country, as is the case with Columbus and America.

Shadow stopped in the street, and stared. “Are you trying to tell me that ancient Egyptians came here to trade five thousand years ago?”

Mr. Ibis said nothing, but he smirked loudly. Then he said, “Three thousand five hundred and thirty years ago. Give or take.”

“Okay,” said Shadow. “I’ll buy it, I guess. What were they trading?”

“Not much,” said Mr. Ibis. “Animal skins. Some food. Copper from the mines in what would now be Michigan’s upper peninsula. The whole thing was rather a disappointment. Not worth the effort. They stayed here long enough to believe in us, to sacrifice to us, and for a handful of the traders to die of fever and be buried here, leaving us behind them.” He stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk, turned around slowly, arms extended. “*This country has been Grand Central for ten thousand years or more. You say to me, what about Columbus?*” “Sure,” said Shadow, obligingly. “What about him?”

“Columbus did what people had been doing for thousands of years...” (Emphasis Added 348-350)

Now coming to the main focus of my study that is the re-imagining of these deities in literature, I would like to point out their humanization. Now the first thing that we notice is how well they are able to present themselves as human beings, albeit with very mysterious hinting of unheard powers and backgrounds. They have assimilated into human society in their own way to survive the waning of their follower’s beliefs and thus their own power as their power comes from the belief of their devotees. As Pratchett says, “Belief itself is the food of the gods”.

Odin and Loki, Gods from the Norse pantheon appear as Mr. Wednesday and Low-Key Lyesmith in the novel. Odin is the All-Father, the ruler of Asgard in Norse mythology while Loki is the trickster God from the same pantheon. But in the book, Odin is represented as a con-man who has fallen down to petty tricks to even pay for gas for the car but seems to know many things. He is certainly not the grand ruler of Asgard in his American avatar but there is a process of re-avaterization going on here. From a powerful God worshipped by the Norsemen before the Christianization of Scandinavia, he has become a cultural figure representative of a past time and culture of Scandinavia through the use of his figure as a character in literature. Moreover his transition to a figure in popular culture, especially in the American sphere I



feel started with the publication of the *Thor* comics by Marvel Comics. He first appeared in *Journey into Mystery* published initially by Atlas comics in August 1962, and later on was continued by its predecessor Marvel Comics. Currently Odin has entered popular imagination everywhere by the release of the movie *Thor* in 2011 with his role being played by Sir Anthony Hopkins. With the publication and popularity of *American Gods* too, I feel that Odin has been brought back from the annals of history and re-imagined and re-invented for the modern audience while retaining the allure of the exotic and mythological past. So the threat by The Technical Boy, the new age God of technology and internet in *American Gods* as quoted below has been averted.

“You tell Wednesday this, man. You tell him he's history. He's forgotten. He's old. Tell him that we are the future and we don't give a fuck about him or anyone like him. He has been consigned to the Dumpster of history while people like me ride our limos down the superhighway of tomorrow.” (92)

In my opinion, with this process of re-avaterization through the medium of literature, or any other form for that matter, old deities and mythological figures are brought back to life from the “Dumpster of history” and it becomes a way of preserving the culture and traditions of a particular community. This same process can be used to explain every other divine, supernatural and mythological figure depicted in the book. Truth to be told, I personally did not have much knowledge about Slavic or Native American deities, but after reading *American Gods* and the *Iron Druid Chronicles*, it whetted my appetite to research on them which ultimately led me to this area of research. Thus these divine figures at least have avoided the fate of the old forgotten Gods that appear in Shadow's dream as faded relics, statues and totems.

In his dream, he realized that each statue had a name burning on the floor in front of it. The man with the white hair, with a necklace of teeth about his neck, holding a drum, was Leucotios; the broad-hipped woman with monsters dropping from the vast gash between her legs was Hubur; the ram-headed man holding the golden ball was Hershef.

A precise voice, fussy and exact, was speaking to him, in his dream, but he could see no one.

“These are gods who have been forgotten, and now might as well be dead. They can be found only in dry histories. They are gone, all gone, but their names and their images remain with us.”

Shadow turned a corner, and knew himself to be in another room, even vaster than the first. It went on farther than the eye could see....The voice spoke once more, as if it were addressing a class, saying, “These are the gods who have passed out of memory. Even their names are lost. The people who worshiped them are as forgotten as their gods. Their totems are long since broken and cast down. Their last priests died without passing on their secrets.

“Gods die. And when they truly die they are unmourned and unremembered. Ideas are more difficult to kill than people, but they can be killed, in the end.” (101)

This is the fate that Mr. Wednesday and Low-Key were trying to avoid in Gaiman's book, but regardless of the failure of their plan, we know they and all the rest of the Old Gods are going to endure in literature and popular culture.

The book itself references this process of transformation and re-invention of divine figures in relation to Mad Sweeney, about whose transmutation throughout history Mr. Ibis notes:

According to Mr. Ibis, Mad Sweeney had started his life as the guardian of a sacred rock in a small Irish glade, over three thousand years ago. Mr. Ibis told them of Mad Sweeney's love affairs, his enmities, the madness that gave him

his power (“a later version of the tale is still told, although the sacred nature, and the antiquity, of much of the verse has long been forgotten”), *the worship and adoration in his own land that slowly transmuted into a guarded respect and then, finally into amusement...*(Emphasis Added 406)

There is further another reference to the migration of different people and communities to Ireland and the different religion and Gods that accompanied them which changed and transformed as time passed and other migrants with their varied cultures entered the land and influenced it.

Sweeney was trying, with both hands, to explain the history of the gods in Ireland, wave after wave of them as they came in from Gaul and from Spain and from every damn place, each wave of them transforming the last gods into trolls and fairies and every damn creature until Holy Mother Church herself arrived and every god in Ireland was transformed into a fairy or a saint or a dead King without so much as a by-your-leave.. (406)

This in my opinion is significant in relation to my study as it references the process of “re-avatarization” of Gods in literature and popular culture which I am focussed on. This further emphasizes the fact that this process is a historical, cultural and temporal reality across geographical locations. But the geographical focus of my study is the U.S.A as both Gaiman and Hearne’s story majorly occurs here. As Mr. Ibis says, “This country has been Grand Central for ten thousand years or more.”, which makes it a optimum choice to study the process of migration, cultural acculturation and assimilation in relation to the “re-avatarization” of divine figures of the migrant communities.

## **GODS HERE AND GODS THERE**

Kevin Hearne’s *Iron Druid* chronicles presents the adventures of Atticus, an Irish Druid, more than two thousands of years old, who is the last druid on earth due to the destruction of druidery and pagan customs in Ireland. He has his talking Irish Wolfhound Oberon and is later joined by Granuaile, whom later Atticus himself trains to be a druid, and Owen Kennedy, Atticus’ old Archdruid in the book. It brings in supernatural creatures and Gods from various parts of the world and who interact with Atticus as he tries to stay hidden as a store owner in Arizona, in U.S.A. So far seven full length books have been published though the series is yet to end. The first book in the series is *Hounded*, followed by *Hexed*, *Hammered*, *Tricked*, *Trapped*, *Hunted* and *Shattered*.

In *American Gods* we learn that America is “not a good country for gods” (916) but here we find that America has very few Gods, mostly Native American ones.

But for me, the true attraction of America is that it’s practically godless. When I was younger and dodging the Romans, I could hardly walk a mile in Europe without stepping on a stone sacred to some god or other. But out here in Arizona, all I have to worry about is the occasional encounter with Coyote, and I actually rather like him. (He’s nothing like Thor, for one thing, and that right there means we’re going to get along fine. The local college kids would describe Thor as a “major asshat” if they ever had the misfortune to meet him.) (*Hounded* 9)

So Hearne differs from Gaiman on this account as the Gods have not travelled with the various migrants to the new lands in alternate forms or versions of themselves as we have seen previously. Instead the Gods from different pantheons either reside in different planes or dimensions, that is alternate realities tied to our ordinary world (the Tuatha de Danaan in Tir Na Og, the Norse in Asgard, the Olympians on Mount Olympus etc.) or co-exist with humans in this plane (Coyote). The reference to Thor, the thunder God of the Norse pantheon in the later part of the excerpt is significant



because firstly it posits familiarity with the divine figure while for most of us it is their other-worldliness and doubt regarding their very existence that establishes their divinity. We cannot claim to have proof of their existence let alone know about their personality traits. Secondly the use of an expletive to describe a God strips away the other-worldly divine aura surrounding them. It trans-locates the divine figure from a religious and spiritual sphere to a more mundane and accessible plane by their “re-avaterization” in fiction.

Vidar bristled. He didn't like being scolded by a naked woman in front of all the macho thunder gods. If he let it stand, he would lose major testosterone points. Was he smart enough to let it go? He clenched his jaw, held out his left hand, and beckoned. “Give me the sword, woman, or I will take it.” Nope. Not smart at all....Now he was neatly trapped in a prison of his own devising. Yet he still had the key; all he had to do was laugh at the Morrigan and say, “I was only joking. Begone with your faerie sword, I care not,” and he'd get to return to Asgard a hero, maybe even take over the joint. He could walk into Gladsheim and tell the remaining Æsir, “I slew the dude who slew Freyr and Týr and crippled Odin,” and then they'd fete him and praise him and he'd definitely get laid. The last thing he should do is listen to the voice of machismo and give battle to a goddess whose primary power is to *choose who dies in battle*. Did he think he was invincible somehow? Did he not understand that all the Norse prophecies were null, the Norns were dead and so were many of the gods who were supposed to fall in Ragnarok? He was no longer fated to kill Fenris in the final gore-spattered brouhaha. If my trip to Asgard and the butchered remains of Týr showed anything, it showed that the Æsir could now die at any time.

But no, the dumbass charged. “For Odin!” he cried, thinking perhaps it was a lucky thing to say since it had worked so well against the fallen Druid. (*Tricked* 22-25)

I have quoted this long passage for a reason as it highlights Hearne's handling of divine figures in his series. Now Vidar is a God from the Norse pantheon, son of Odin and associated with vengeance. Here he and Tyr from the same pantheon are working along with thunder Gods from other pantheons like Ukko from Finland, Indra from India, Lei Gong from China, Raijin from Japan, and Shango from Nigeria to capture Atticus and get their revenge for his role in the attack of Asgard and the slaying of Thor and many others. Now what we see in this passage is male posturing and overt display of machismo by Vidar to establish masculinity and at the same time to retain it in front of the other thunder Gods. Now, Michael Kimmel in “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity” says, “[Men] are under constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, and grant our acceptance in to the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance” (186). So here Hearne ascribes human masculine roles and practices to a divine figure thus in my opinion re-inventing his divinity and welcoming laughter from the audience rather than devotion.

There is again almost a nonchalant and casual insulting of Gods, as here Vidar's intelligence has been questioned and he is termed as a “dumbass”. We had previously seen this before in *American Gods* where many Gods had insulted each other, reminiscent of people who have known each other for a very long time, and can afford to do so. For instance Wednesday, the All-Father has variously referred to as “hustler”(65), “old fraud”(552) and in one of the most expletive laden sentences in this book, by John Chapman as such:

He looked up at Shadow, raised his hand, palm out. “I'm John Chapman. You don't mind anything your boss says about me. He's an asshole. Always was an asshole. Always goin' to be an asshole. Some people is jes' assholes, and that's

an end of it.” (691)

Going back to Hearne, this insulting of Gods in my opinion strips away the aura of worshipful devotion, awe and wonder with which we as normal humanity view Gods. Thus, we see them being transmuted from religious and spiritual figures to cultural figures, in this instance, representative of ancient Norsemen and their culture, and then popular culture by this new re-invention in Hearne’s books. The change from the religious to the popular occurs in Hearne’s particular handling of the divine figures as the same treatment is not meted out to all figures. For instance though belonging to the same pantheon, Indra has been presented as a womanizer with a huge ego and not very intelligent while Durga is handled with comparatively more respect and reverence. Her divinity has not been stripped off during her appearance in *Shattered*.

Moreover the mention of their mortality and the deaths that occur in the series, for instance Aenghus Og and Bres of the Tuatha de Dannan in *Hounded*, Thor, Freyr of the Norse pantheon etc. in *Hammered* and many more presents a similar picture to what we saw in *American Gods*. In Gaiman, Gods die when they are forgotten by people and not worshipped anymore. It is a metaphysical kind of death linked to the waning of belief, abstract and metaphorical but at the same time they can be physically killed as we see during the murder of Bilquis, the Queen of Sheba and Wednesday. This is true for Hearne’s books too as on one hand we have the physical deaths of the Gods for instance during combat but at the same time their existence is also connected to the beliefs of people. As Perun the Slavic God of thunder says in *Hammered*:

Small ideas eat up by big ideas. Big ideas stay for long time in brains of men. Small ones forgotten; is like little fish eaten up by big fish.

Gods are big ideas. They stay for long time in brains. They walk on earth or live in sky or water or under ground. But even gods can be eaten by bigger gods.

I was eaten by Christ. You see? Christ ate many gods. I mean he ate me as idea, not as flesh. He ate me and other Slavic gods. He ate Celtic gods and Greek gods, Roman gods and Norse gods—even Väinämöinen here—and took their places in brains of men. Some of those old gods are dead now. Men have forget—no, forgot—them.

But I am not gone from all brains yet. There are some who remember me. There are some who still worship. I will not die until they forget. (358)

This excerpt not only emphasises the power of belief but also describes the change in the religious practices of communities with the coming of a different belief system which dominates and reduces the influence of the earlier belief system and its worship. The eventual dominance of Christianity over other belief systems has been highlighted here. We see a similar instance in Gaiman when Mad Sweeney narrates the waves of change in terms of religion with reference to Ireland.

Hearne in his series highlights the power of literature, of the written word, to ensure immortality and future remembrance in the minds of people about certain ideas, people, practices and especially in this case Gods. Perun again talks about the erosion of his pantheon from public memory and his consequent weakening due to the non-existence of any written literature while Christ, Buddha etc. survive due to their holy texts while the memory of the Norse are preserved in their Eddas- the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*.

And any writing that goes on statues gets worn away by time. So then Christ comes with his reading monks and their printed word, and idea of Christ remains and grows while idea of Perun washes away in rain and wind.

This is how gods are strong today. Christ, Allah, Yahweh, Buddha, Krishna: They have pages and pages of words about them. These words travel everywhere to bring idea of them to new generations. I have stone statues that travel nowhere...Odin saw this coming. He sent Thor to me to trick me into slow death. Then he sent Thor to Iceland to have their skaldic poets write *Eddas*. Centuries later, when it is too late, I see what happen. Norse remembered because of *Eddas*. They still weaker than before Christ, but much stronger than me. Because of words. Because now children in many parts of the world hear about them. And so they are bigger ideas...Zeus and Jupiter doing fine. Much written about them by their people. Thor and Odin doing very well. And I think they see this time coming long ago. Old One-Eye throws runes, or he talks to Norns, and he sees what he must do to remain strong in age of science. He sees that he must make idea of Norse become bigger than ideas of Slavs or Celts or other peoples. And he sees he can do this with words instead of spear. (*Hammered* 358-361)

The above excerpt not only reiterates the power of literature but also the maxim that the pen is mightier than the sword or in this case spear.

#### **FROM GODS TO CHARACTERS-THE HINDU PANTHEON**

In *American Gods*, Gaiman mentions few divine figures from the Hindu pantheon, Kubera, Kali, and Ganesha (and only a passing reference to Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and their roles as creator, preserver and destroyer).

Goddess Kali has been depicted in greater details than the others. Her human look as well as her supernatural forms have both been presented.

I'm tired, thought Shadow. He glanced to his right and snuck a glance at the Indian woman. He noted the tiny silver necklace of skulls that circled her neck; her charm bracelet of heads and hands that jangled, like tiny bells, when she moved; the dark blue jewel on her forehead. She smelled of spices, of cardamom and nutmeg and flowers. Her hair was pepper-and-salt, and she smiled when she saw him look at her.

"You call me Mama-ji," she said. (249)

Her human and mundane form has several references to her more traditional descriptions, for instance the tiny silver necklace of skulls around the neck clearly a nod to her chain of skulls. The charm bracelet to her traditional description wearing a belt of human heads and hands, the dark blue jewel on her forehead to the mystical third eye. Her representation in the more traditional form familiar to us has also been described:

Again, a moment of double vision; Shadow saw the old woman, her dark face pinched with age and disapproval, but behind her he saw something huge, a naked woman with skin as black as a new leather jacket, and lips and tongue the bright red of arterial blood. Around her neck were skulls, and her many hands held knives, and swords, and severed heads. (242-244)

The smell of spices however presents an interesting situation which I would like to focus on. As I had previously postulated, the presentation of the Hindu Gods gives of vibes of the 'Exotic Orient' from the point of view of the 'West'. The reference to spices in my opinion is a clear allusion to India's spice trade from ancient times onwards with its exotic

spices and culinary traditions. Exotic spices like the cardamom and mace, the ubiquitous flowers in our daily life, either as offerings to God, worn on Indian women's hair or used in religious ceremonies, paints a picture of an exotic and mystical land, the "Exotic Orient" from the point of view of a British White "Western" writer. Moreover her description in her spiritual form with all its concomitant gory skulls and severed heads, faithful to traditional descriptions of the Goddess in idol form, further cements her exotic allure. This is clearly very far from the brand of "Indian Spirituality" marketed outside India by new age gurus and spiritual leaders which is geared towards peace and brotherhood, certainly not depictions of overt violence with skulls and severed limbs with reference to their deities. But on the point on which Gaiman differs from Hearne is the handling of these figures. Gaiman's representation of Kali demands a certain level of respect and awe, if not worshipful adoration but in Hearne, Goddess Durga is addressed more as a powerful saviour, with proper supplication and worshipful respect entirely missing. She is addressed as just Durga by Granuaile while it would have been unheard off to address the Goddess in such a casual manner by a practicing Hindu and Shakti worshipper. Kali in *American Gods* is treated with respect and addressed as Mama-ji, an honorific and clearly she is seen as formidable, wise and powerful. Now with the depiction of Ganesha, I would like to focus on a certain humanizing aspect. I have already mentioned how these divine figures have been humanized while retaining their God-like power and ego, and their mysterious and exotic appeal.

He shook his head, dislodging or frightening it, and returned to his dreams-and now an elephant-headed man, potbellied, one tusk broken, was riding toward him on the back of a huge mouse. The elephant-headed man curled his trunk toward Shadow and said, "If you had invoked me before you began this journey, perhaps some of your troubles might have been avoided." Then the elephant took the mouse, which had, by some means that Shadow could not perceive, become tiny while not changing in size at all, and passed it from hand to hand to hand, fingers curling about it as the little creature scampered from palm to palm, and Shadow was not at all surprised when the elephant-headed god finally opened all four of his hands to reveal them perfectly empty. He shrugged arm after arm after arm in a peculiar fluid motion, and looked at Shadow, his face unreadable. (821)

Now if we look at the excerpt above, Ganesha's divinity is invoked and at the same time he is shown as performing a magic trick with his mouse. The juxtaposition of the sacred and the human in my opinion has been Gaiman's modus operandi throughout the novel. It serves as a shock to the reader to see divine figures cursing for instance (and there is a lot of cursing by various characters) or having one night stands (Wednesday for instance uses his charm and magic to bed virgins and regain a little power). They do not get any human diseases but they perform many human activities like eating, sleeping, snoring and cooking.

Shadow nodded. Something started to fall into place. A dream, on the tree. "Hey," he said. "Is there a god with an elephant's head?"

"Ganesh? He's a Hindu god. He removes obstacles, and makes journeys easier. Good cook, too." 980

If we look at the above extract, which is a part of a conversation between Shadow and Mr. Nancy (or Anansi), Mr. Nancy replies to Shadow's query by giving the familiar description of Ganesha as a Hindu God and remover of obstacles but incongruously tags in an added line-"Good cook too." This I feel results in a stripping of awe and wonder associated with divine figures and makes them more relatable to the reading audience while at the same time retaining the other-worldliness of the figure to satisfy the lovers of fantasy and the supernatural.

In Kevin Hearne's *Iron Druid* Chronicles, Ganesha again appears, in a minor but pivotal role. He is described as a bare-chested man with four arms and an impressive belly. Underneath this, salwar pants of orange silk covered his legs until they ended at his sandaled feet. (*Tricked* 365)

Going with the trend seen in *American Gods*, we too see a degree of humanization in the figure of Ganesha. In the following interaction between Atticus and Ganesha, we see a juxtaposition of Ganesha's divinity (the interaction occurs in a dream where Ganesha can manifest anything or anyone according to his wish) and a very human ritual of sharing a beer.

"Right. At the risk of reigniting the wrath of my old archdruid, would there be any obstacles to us having a beer while we talk?"

Two cold, frosty flagons appeared in a couple of Ganesha's hands, and he offered one to me. "It is a Dream. I don't see why not." The beer was a hoppy pilsner with a crisp finish, and it tasted of trust and serenity and a love for learning. Ganesha's trunk sank into his flagon, and he drained the entire draught in one go. Elephants aren't supposed to be able to drink using their trunks, but Ganesha didn't care. He was a god, this was a Dream, and so he was going to suck down a beer through his trunk if he wanted. He *ahhed* in satisfaction, and then the flagon simply disappeared. (*Tricked* 365-368)

Now in this re-avaterization of Ganesha, the Hindu God has become a beer guzzling God with a Tamil accent who is the spokesperson for a group of Gods from diverse pantheons with hidden agendas. This action of drinking beer is significant as it reveals the author's unfamiliarity with Hindu religious customs and traditions and shows his handling of the information at his disposal. As we all know, alcohol is taboo in mainstream Hindu religious customs and considered to be profane. So the God to whom we offer milk as an offering is incongruously shown here enjoying a beer with evident amusement and satisfaction. In my opinion Hearne has Americanized or even "Westernized" Ganesha by depicting this scene, as sharing beer between men is part of the larger American popular culture.

I feel that Hearne has taken material from various religious mythologies and re-invented them in his own mould to make it more accessible and entertaining for the larger American audience. The exotic element of having an elephant-headed God with Indian elements like the traditional outfit and the accent is juxtaposed with a very human as well as significantly American cultural element. This strategy has been repeated with the depiction of all his divine characters as we have already seen.

In the depiction of Devi Durga for instance, we see another variation. When she manifests in front of Laksha and Granuaile, she is presented as such:

Durga is represented in art with varying numbers of arms, but tonight she has manifested with eight. In six of these arms, she wields the trident of Shiva, the sudarshana-chakra of Vishnu, the thunderbolt of Indra, the spear of Agni, the mace of Kubera, and the sword of Yama. She raises one empty hand in greeting and nods ever so slightly at me. (*Shattered* 259)

When one is used to sanitized images of Mother Mary, an incarnation of the divine female form with eight arms wielding powerful weapons is powerful, exotic, alluring and empowering. But as with Ganesha, Hearne's unfamiliarity with Hindu customs is apparent in the text. For instance during the fight with the demons in India, Granuaile shouts these

lines at the Goddess:

*Stay with me*, I tell her, and then I shout at the devi, “Wait, Durga, I can separate the raksoyuj from the man! I just need one more chance!” (*Shattered* 301)

It would have been unthinkable for a practicing Hindu to first shout at her, second order a Goddess and third to address her as just Durga. In another instance we see,

Unsure of what to do but feeling that some gesture of respect is needed, I clasp my hands together and bow.

“I wish you peace, Durga.” It feels inadequate, but she accepts it.

“You have my blessing,” she replies, and these are not empty words, for I take a breath and the roiling inside me calms down somewhat. (*Shattered* 329)

Granuaile here attempts to perform a gesture of respect, clasping hands and bowing, but then again, Hearne shows his unfamiliarity by making Granuaile address the devi as simply Durga and wishing her peace instead. This is a bending and blending of traditions, Indian and American and we see a depiction which retains elements of the original but has been re-imagined to make it accessible to a new unfamiliar audience.

Even Hearne’s use of mythological stories is geared towards providing entertainment value, any story of and God or pantheon which might be fantastic, exciting, humorous or interesting is mentioned by him during the course of the narrative. For instance the story of Indra from the Hindu pantheon:

Indra was quite the character, for example, and undoubtedly the most powerful of the lot currently. He had a reputation for lovin’ the ladies, a tendency I couldn’t criticize myself, but he got himself into some awful trouble for it once. He chose to lay down with the wife of a magician, who of course found out immediately that Indra was “in da house” and assigned him a punishment worthy of Dante: Since the thunder god could think of nothing but vaginas, the cuckolded husband cursed Indra with a thousand vaginas all over his body. Indra had to walk around like that for a while, until Krishna took pity on him and commuted the sentence by turning all the vaginas into eyes. Still, think of the optometrist appointments. (*Tricked* 15)

He does take certain artistic liberties with his descriptions but retains the base truth of the original story and here he has presented it in a humorous manner. So it becomes a mixture of exotic, the fantastic and a universal trope.

## CONCLUSIONS

The primary focus of this study was on the re-avatorization of Gods though many other elements entered as a logical corollary. The idea of selective assimilation and retention that I have previously highlighted can be seen in the handling of the characters as I feel the novels become a fictional constructed platform where migration of ideas and cultural fusion takes place.

This article establishes the connection between a community and its living culture to religious beliefs and practices through a look at its divine figures and their representation through the medium of literature. These novels become the text for our study of said connection focussing on the contact between different cultures and its implications. It also focuses on migration or movement of ideas from all over the world where it fuses in the mind of the author, himself a



product of a certain environment, thus producing a final product. The author becomes representative in my opinion of one culture as he takes the material at hand and reworks them thus imposing his own ideology and understanding of other cultures into his creations. The contact between different cultural practices as such occurs in him and is manifested in his work. The re-avaterization thus occurs due to this process and it is left to the discerning researcher to study the text and identify them.

## REFERENCES

1. Cadge, W., & Howard Ecklund, E. (2007). Immigration And Religion. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33, 359-379. Retrieved January 4, 2015, from 10.1146/annurev.soc.33.040406.131707
2. Gaiman, N. (2001). *American Gods*. New York: W. Morrow.
3. Hearne, K. (2011). *Hounded*. New York: Del Rey/Ballantine Books.
4. Hearne, K. (2011). *Hammered*. New York: Del Rey/Ballantine Books.
5. Hearne, K. (2012). *Tricked*. New York: Del Rey/Ballantine Books.
6. Hearne, K. (2014). *Shattered*. New York: Del Rey.
7. Kimmel, M. (2004). Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity. In P. Murphy (Ed.), *Feminism and Masculinities* (pp. 182-199). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
8. Pratchett, T. (1992). *Small Gods*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
9. The Rush of Immigrants. (n.d.). Retrieved January 7, 2015, from <http://www.ushistory.org/us/38c.asp>

