



Mythological Reimagination in Contemporary Fantasy: A Comparative Analysis of Amish Tripathi and Rick Riordan

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Abstract

This paper examines the divergent approaches to mythological adaptation in contemporary fantasy literature through a comparative analysis of Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy and Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson series. While both authors engage in mythological retelling for modern audiences, their methodologies reflect fundamentally different cultural positioning, narrative strategies, and ideological commitments. Tripathi's work emerges from within Indian cultural discourse, treating Hindu mythology as living tradition requiring reverent reinterpretation, whereas Riordan approaches Greek mythology as cultural artifact available for creative appropriation. Through close textual analysis grounded in adaptation theory and postcolonial literary criticism, this study demonstrates how each author's treatment of sacred narratives reveals broader tensions between cultural preservation and global commodification, between reverence and irreverence, and between insider and outsider perspectives on mythological tradition. The analysis illuminates how contemporary fantasy literature functions as a site of cultural negotiation, where ancient narratives are continually rearticulated to address present concerns while navigating the complex dynamics of cultural ownership, religious sensibility, and literary innovation.

Keywords: - Mythological Adaptation, Amish Tripathi, Rick Riordan, Hindu Mythology, Greek Mythology, Cultural Positioning, Narrative Strategies, Religious Sensibility

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented global surge in mythological fantasy literature, with ancient narratives being reimagined for contemporary audiences across diverse cultural contexts. This phenomenon raises critical questions about the relationship between tradition and innovation, the ethics of cultural adaptation, and the role of popular literature in mediating sacred narratives. Two authors exemplify contrasting approaches to this enterprise: Amish Tripathi, whose Shiva Trilogy (2010-2013) reinterprets Hindu mythology for Indian and global readers, and Rick Riordan, whose Percy Jackson series (2005-2009) transplants Greek mythology into contemporary American settings.¹ While both have achieved commercial success and critical attention, their works emerge from fundamentally different cultural positions and employ divergent narrative strategies that merit scholarly examination.

This paper argues that Tripathi and Riordan represent two distinct paradigms of mythological adaptation: the insider's reverent reconstruction versus the outsider's creative appropriation. Tripathi, writing from within Hindu cultural tradition, approaches mythology as living religious heritage requiring careful reinterpretation that honors its sacred dimensions while making it accessible to modern

sensibilities. Riordan, conversely, treats Greek mythology as secularized cultural property available for imaginative transformation and commercial exploitation. These differing approaches reflect broader tensions in postcolonial and globalized literary production, where questions of cultural authenticity, representational ethics, and literary authority remain contested.

The significance of this comparative analysis extends beyond literary criticism to illuminate how contemporary societies negotiate relationships with cultural heritage. By examining how Tripathi and Riordan navigate these tensions, this study contributes to understanding mythology's evolving role in contemporary global culture.

2. Theoretical Framework: Adaptation, Appropriation, and Cultural Position

This analysis draws upon several intersecting theoretical frameworks. Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory provides foundational concepts for understanding how narratives transform across media and cultural contexts. Hutcheon distinguishes between adaptation as "an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work" and appropriation as more radical transformation that may obscure original sources.² This distinction proves particularly relevant when examining how Tripathi and Riordan differently signal their relationships to source mythologies.

Postcolonial theory, particularly as articulated by Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, offers critical tools for analyzing power dynamics in cultural representation. Bhabha's concept of "colonial mimicry" and "cultural translation" helps illuminate how colonized cultures must navigate between authentic tradition and globalized modernity.³ Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism" similarly explains how marginalized groups may deliberately emphasize cultural authenticity for political purposes.⁴ These concepts prove essential for understanding Tripathi's positioning within Indian cultural nationalism.

Contemporary scholarship on world literature and translation, especially work by Emily Apter and Rebecca Walkowitz, addresses how texts circulate globally and adapt to diverse reception contexts.^{5,6} Their emphasis on literature's translinguistic and transcultural dimensions informs analysis of how mythological narratives travel across cultural boundaries.

Finally, religious studies scholarship on "lived religion" and "popular theology" provides frameworks for understanding how sacred narratives function outside institutional religious contexts. Scholars like Diana Eck and Wendy Doniger have examined how Hindu mythology operates as both religious scripture and cultural narrative, a duality that profoundly shapes Tripathi's approach.^{7,8}

3. Cultural Positioning and Authorial Authority

The most fundamental distinction between Tripathi and Riordan lies in their cultural positioning relative to their source mythologies. Tripathi, an Indian banker-turned-author, writes explicitly for an Indian audience seeking to reconnect with Hindu tradition. His author's notes frame the Shiva Trilogy as an attempt to "imagine Lord Shiva as a human being" while maintaining reverence for the divine.⁹ This positioning reflects what Arjun Appadurai terms "vernacular cosmopolitanism" a mode of cultural production that navigates between local tradition and global modernity.¹⁰

Tripathi's insider status grants him cultural authority but also imposes constraints. He must negotiate between innovation and orthodoxy, between creative freedom and religious sensibility. His novels consistently emphasize their devotional intent, with dedications to Lord Shiva and acknowledgments of mythological sources. This careful framing reflects awareness that Hindu mythology remains living religious tradition for millions, not merely literary material.

Riordan's position differs markedly. As an American author adapting Greek mythology a tradition distanced by millennia and secularization from contemporary religious practice he operates with greater creative freedom. Greek mythology functions in Western education as classical heritage, cultural foundation, yet not living religious practice. This secularization enables Riordan's irreverent, comic tone and radical recontextualization. His protagonist Percy Jackson can mock the gods without courting religious controversy, a liberty unavailable to Tripathi when depicting Hindu deities.

However, Riordan's outsider status to Greek culture proves less significant than his insider status within American culture. His novels naturalize Greek mythology within American settings, making Olympus hover above the Empire State Building, placing gods in contemporary American scenarios. This domestication reflects what Mary Louise Pratt calls the "contact zone" spaces where disparate cultures meet and negotiate power relations.¹¹ Riordan's work exemplifies how dominant cultures freely appropriate others' heritage while maintaining their own cultural frameworks.

Table 1. Showing Comparative Framework

Comparative Framework	Amish Tripathi	Rick Riordan
Cultural Position	Insider to source mythology	Outsider to source, insider to target culture
Relationship to Tradition	Living religious heritage	Secularized classical heritage
Authorial Authority	Cultural-religious legitimacy	Creative-literary freedom
Primary Audience	Indian readers reconnecting with tradition	Western readers encountering mythology
Narrative Tone	Reverential yet humanizing	Irreverent, comedic
Adaptation Strategy	Rationalization and historicization	Contemporization and Americanization

4. Narrative Strategies and Mythological Adaptation

Tripathi and Riordan employ contrasting narrative strategies reflecting their different cultural positions and objectives. Tripathi's primary technique involves rationalization reimagining mythological events as historical occurrences explainable through naturalistic causation. In *The Immortals of Meluha*, Shiva transforms from cosmic deity to tribal leader whose "third eye" represents advanced martial skill rather than supernatural power.¹² Mythological weapons like the Brahmastra become advanced technologies. This rationalization serves dual purposes: making mythology accessible to modern rational consciousness while implicitly arguing for historical authenticity of Hindu traditions.

This strategy reflects what Sheldon Pollock terms "Sanskrit cosmopolitanism" the use of classical tradition to negotiate modernity.¹³ By grounding mythology in pseudo-historical narrative, Tripathi participates in longstanding Indian discourse seeking to establish Vedic civilization's historical legitimacy. His novels thus function as popular theology, offering interpretations accessible to readers uncomfortable with supernatural elements yet seeking cultural connection.

Riordan's strategy emphasizes contemporization rather than rationalization. Greek gods remain supernatural beings but operate within contemporary American society. Zeus wears business suits; Ares rides motorcycles; Dionysus manages a summer camp. This approach transforms mythology into what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "carnavalesque" the comic subversion of established hierarchies. Ancient gods become subject to modern inconveniences, bureaucracies, and social norms, creating humor through anachronism.

5. Sacred Narrative and Religious Sensibility

The treatment of religious sensibility constitutes perhaps the sharpest distinction between these authors. Tripathi's work maintains consistent reverence toward Hindu deities even while humanizing them. His Shiva remains fundamentally heroic flawed yet noble, human yet transcendent. The novels never mock Hindu practices or beliefs; rather, they explain them through rational frameworks. Rituals, prayers, and religious philosophy receive serious treatment, with characters engaging in genuine spiritual discourse.

This reverence reflects Tripathi's awareness of writing within living religious tradition. Hinduism lacks the doctrinal authority structures of Abrahamic religions, allowing diverse interpretations, yet maintains strong popular sensibilities about appropriate deity representation. Tripathi navigates these sensibilities carefully, his novels receiving endorsements from religious leaders while sparking debates about interpretive legitimacy.

Riordan's approach proves far more irreverent. His gods exhibit petty jealousies, absurd vanities, and moral failings that become sources of comedy. Zeus appears as bombastic tyrant; Ares as brutish bully; Dionysus as perpetually annoyed camp director. This comic treatment reflects Greek mythology's status in Western culture educational heritage rather than religious practice. The absence of contemporary Greek paganism as significant religious movement grants Riordan freedom unavailable to Tripathi.

6. Conclusion

This comparative analysis of Amish Tripathi and Rick Riordan reveals fundamentally divergent approaches to mythological adaptation reflecting different cultural positions, ideological commitments, and literary strategies. Tripathi's reverent reconstruction of Hindu mythology from within Indian cultural tradition contrasts sharply with Riordan's irreverent appropriation of Greek mythology for American audiences. These differences illuminate broader tensions in postcolonial and globalized literary production between cultural preservation and commercial exploitation, between insider authority and outsider creativity, between sacred heritage and entertainment commodity.

Both authors achieve commercial success and cultural impact, yet their works serve different functions and navigate different constraints. Tripathi participates in Indian cultural nationalism while offering progressive interpretations of tradition; Riordan democratizes classical education while commodifying ancient heritage. Neither approach proves inherently superior; rather, each responds to specific cultural contexts and audience needs.

The significance of these works extends beyond entertainment to broader questions about cultural ownership, representational ethics, and tradition's role in contemporary societies. As globalization intensifies cultural contact and migration diversifies societies, questions about who may tell which stories, how traditions should be adapted, and what obligations attend cultural representation become increasingly urgent. Tripathi and exemplify two responses to these questions, their successes and limitations illuminating ongoing negotiations between past and present, local and global, sacred and secular.

Future scholarship should continue examining how contemporary fantasy literature mediates relationships with cultural heritage across diverse contexts. Comparative approaches prove particularly valuable, revealing patterns and tensions that single-culture studies miss. As mythology continues adapting to contemporary forms, critical analysis must similarly adapt, developing frameworks adequate to the complexity of cultural production in globalized, postcolonial contexts.

Ultimately, both Tripathi's and Riordan's works demonstrate mythology's enduring power to captivate imaginations and address contemporary concerns. Ancient narratives prove remarkably plastic, capable of reinterpretation across radically different contexts while maintaining cultural resonance. This plasticity ensures mythology's continued relevance, though the terms of adaptation remain contested terrain where questions of cultural power, religious sensibility, and literary innovation continue to intersect and conflict.

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